

## The Path

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# The Path

by [Seastar98](#)

## Summary

Some fates are set in stone. Others are written in sand. No one can know which they have until they try to change them.

Nie Huaisang decides to do something about Wei Wuxian's exile. Maybe his path is set, but the least he can do is try, right?

- Translation into Русский available: [Путь](#) by [PolinaGaer](#)

# The Gift

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jiang Yanli examined the orb Nie Huaisang gifted her. It was an early present for her son, but only technically. He told her it was an old device, originally intended to be a stored form of Empathy, thereby making it less dangerous. It showed what a person saw and heard in whatever memories they chose to share.

They'd lost popularity over time. People realized if they verbally described events they could skew them in their favor. She sighed, wishing they lived in a time where true objectivity mattered more than politics and power plays.

The memories it contained swirled around, different colors representing different people. The majority were black for A-Xian. It was a dark color for such a bright soul, but she didn't expect much of what they were going to show to be happy. A-Cheng's were the brilliant purple of Zidian, and they sparked easily, just like his temper.

Her own were the softened pink of lotus flowers. She presumed the white was Hanguang-Jun's, living up to his title as the light-bearer. The occasional glimpse of cool blue so often entangled with them must be Zewu-Jun. The deep green was Nie Huaisang, always entangled with someone else's.

She guessed the red of the sunrise was Wen Qing, with the faded red her brother Wen Ning. She carefully did not comment on how much of the bright red was intertwined with her brother's purple.

Jiang Yanli paused in her examination, "Nie-gongzi, why would you do this?"

The pampered Young Master of Qinghe fiddled with his fan, "I almost lost my brother once, and there was nothing I could do. I figured...if I could do something I should, right?"

"Your brother is going to break your legs," Jiang Cheng muttered.

"Let him," Nie Huaisang shrugged, "If we're right about Wei-xiong-"

"Which we are," Her little brother interrupted.

"-then there are others his anger will be focused on."

For A-Xian, this was an opportunity to give an account of his actions. He could save himself, and those he was protecting.

The rest of them strove to show those condemned in the best light. She poured her darkest memories into it, hoping the world could forgive her little brother for his demonic cultivation when they saw the depths of their despair and desperation.



She also put some good ones to highlight how righteous he was. She was certain she was the only person A-Xian allowed himself to cry in front of. If the world saw what she did, maybe they would love him as she did.

“Wei-xiong promised he showed everything about his involvement with the Yin Iron,” Nie Huaisang moved closer, “Also the creation of the Stygian Tiger Amulet, the Sunshot Campaign and Qiongqi Pass.”

She nodded, “I trust he did as he said.”

“I thought, once you give birth, we could show it at the ensuing celebration,” He opened the fan and hid the bottom part of his face, “I was planning to sell it as a viewing of Hanguang-Jun and Wei-xiong’s fight against the Xuanwu of Slaughter and the sacking of Nightless City with the death of Wen Ruohan. That way it can count as entertainment.”

Her husband nodded, moving to take the orb from her hands. There was a pause, then gold flashed amongst the other colors, “My father should have nothing to fear from such revelations.”

Jiang Cheng scoffed, but kept his silence.

Jiang Yanli smiled at A-Xuan, then turned her smile back to Nie Huaisang, “I can’t begin to express my gratitude. You’re giving our son another uncle.”

“Only if this works,” But he was also smiling.

They would make it work.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jin Guangyao welcomed more guests into the hall, pushing down his feeling of dread. Ever since Jin Zixuan asked him to set aside a few days of the celebration for this, he’d felt the sword hanging over his head. Not that Wei Wuxian would have any memories of his crimes. Everything at Qiongqi Pass could be blamed on Jin Zixun.

It would be an embarrassment for the Jin Sect. It would endanger his father’s position as the Chief Cultivator. After all, if he couldn’t manage his own Sect without being blind to such corruption, how could he manage the cultivation world?

The only fault they had evidence of for himself was negligence.

He reminded himself of that as more people poured in. The entire cultivation world would usually come to such an elaborate celebration for the birth of the heir to the Jin Sect, but even those who did not care for Sect politics came because of Huaisang’s gift. They wanted to see Hanguang-Jun and the Yiling Patriarch defeat the Xuanwu of Slaughter.

They wanted to see what happened at the Sacking of Nightless City. Only four people survived the final battle. Two of them were Lan, who didn’t gossip or glorify battle. Another was the Yiling Patriarch everyone avoided, even back then. The last was Sect Leader Jiang, who wasn’t the easiest person to approach. No one dared to speak of Wens to him.

Jin Guangyao was forced to encourage such a crowd. After all, Wei Wuxian encountered Xue Yang in his quest for the Yin Iron. It would only benefit his own search for the delinquent if more people saw his face and fighting style.

Lan Xichen smiled at him, “The truth can only be a good thing, A-Yao.”

Easy for him to say. His life didn’t depend on the downfall of others. Jin Guangshan would take his embarrassment out on him. His best hope laid in Wei Wuxian actually using the Yin Iron to create the Stygian Tiger Amulet. If he hadn’t, then the next best hope was that the creation of it was shown so he could attempt to copy it.

If all else failed, he could implicate his father and hope for the mercy of his half-brother to save him.

But he wasn’t exactly close to Jin Zixuan, and Madame Jin hated him.

“How do we know this is real?” Jin Zixun complained loudly, “Do you expect us to trust the Yiling Patriarch to be truthful?”

“No,” Huaisang answered from his place by his brother’s side, “Which is why the rest of us have lent our memories. Any inconsistencies will be obvious. Or do you doubt all of us?”

“Be careful how you answer that,” Nie Mingjue warned.

His arrogant cousin quieted.

There wasn’t a way out of this without looking suspicious, so he kept his head held high and went with it. Sect Leader Nie didn’t like his brother hiding such a venture from him, but he also wanted justice to be served. That meant listening to Wei Wuxian’s account of events fully.

The last of the arrivals took their places, and he stood in front of the room, “If we are all comfortable, the viewing can begin.”

## Chapter End Notes

Anyone can translate my works into any language! If you do so, please credit me and leave a link in the comments. Please also try to avoid duplicates on other websites.

# **It's all the Peacock's fault!**

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

**“I’ll release the dog if you don’t get up.”**

**Wei Wuxian jolted to alertness on a boat, “A dog!”**

Nie Huaisang shook his head at the immediate whispers filling the room. He’d seen some of the depictions of the Yiling Patriarch and laughed. Wei Wuxian was one of the most beautiful people he’d ever met, and his smile was definitely the brightest.

Hopefully they would think that if the depictions were wrong, maybe the rumors were wrong.

**This amused the gathered Jiang disciples, especially his siblings, Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli. The latter half-heartedly chided her younger brother, “Don’t make fun of A-Xian.”**

**Wei Wuxian beamed, “You’re here.” Then he started to get up, grabbing his sword, “Let me up. I’m coming! I’m coming!” He wrapped an arm around Jiang Cheng’s shoulders, “Shijie, everyone is here.”**

**“We haven’t reached Cloud Recesses,” Jiang Yanli replied, “This is Caiyi Town.”**

Jin Zixuan blushed. There was only one reason they would start in Caiyi Town, and he was it.

He internally cursed Wei Wuxian. This was his life on the line. This was his son’s only chance to have both his mother’s brothers in his life, and he was using it to remind him how much of an idiot he’d been.

Oh no, if he didn’t die from embarrassment his mother was going to kill him for his disrespect. She never heard what he said, only rumors about his various confrontations with Wei Wuxian, and those were always warped in his favor.

If his mother didn’t kill him, Jiang Wanyin would.

**Wei Wuxian pursed his lips, then moved in front of them to walk backwards, “Is there anything fun here?”**

**“We’re here for the lecture,” Jiang Cheng scolded, “All you think about is having fun.”**

**Despite his harsh words, Jiang Yanli kept smiling. Wei Wuxian smacked his little brother with his sword, “It’s fun to do something forbidden.”**

Many around the room exchanged looks. No one could say why Wei Wuxian turned to demonic cultivation when he was such a skilled cultivator. Was this it? Did the thrill of

discovering something new, something forbidden, lead to the Stygian Tiger Amulet?

Those who knew him hesitated to believe that.

Those who didn't felt justified in their hatred of him.

**Jiang Cheng smacked him back, reaching around his laughing sister, who looked between them, "All right, you two. This is not our hometown. Remember to behave yourselves."**

**Wei Wuxian gestured, "Look at him."**

**"What's wrong with me?" Jiang Cheng challenged immediately.**

Nie Mingjue split his attention between the projection and Jin Guangyao. If anyone asked him, he agreed to this because he didn't trust the Jins.

In truth, he didn't have the heart to deny Huaisang. His little brother begged him to not oppose this viewing, comparing it to if Xichen suddenly became a demonic cultivator. Wouldn't he want to know why someone so powerful, so good, threw all that away for heresy? Wouldn't he want to know why he chose evil? Would he be able to rest until he understood?

With it put like that, his anger faded. He couldn't imagine Xichen turning to demonic cultivation for anything.

Wei Wuxian was once Huaisang's good friend. If his little brother needed the closure, he would see it through.

**The head disciple was distracted by the treats off to the side. He examined the line of animals for a moment, before picking up the rabbit, "I want this." He paid and ran to catch up to the rest of the group, "Excuse me." He shoved his way back to the siblings, "See. A bunny. Isn't it interesting?"**

**"Yes it is," Jiang Yanli agreed.**

**"Wei Wuxian, stop playing," Jiang Cheng scolded again, "We are getting closer to Cloud Recesses. This time, pupils from all the famous clans will come. Don't let others look down on us because of you."**

**"Okay," Wei Wuxian mollified.**

**Jiang Cheng turned back to the rest of the disciples, "And you should keep this in mind too. From now on-"**

**While his back was turned, Wei Wuxian grabbed Jiang Yanli's arm and led her away.**

There was scattered laughter around the hall at the childish antics.

This was the Yiling Patriarch?

Those that didn't laugh looked down sadly. This was the boy who would grow to be the Yiling Patriarch, and wasn't that tragic?

**“Whatever we say and do represents the YunmengJiang.”**

**“Yes sir,”** The disciples saluted.

**The future Sect Leader turned back to find his two siblings gone. He scanned the crowd in confusion for a moment, before calling out, “Wei Wuxian! Did you hear what I said?” His lips tightened in a frown and he hurried after them.**

Jiang Cheng couldn't find it in himself to be embarrassed. Not with the visual reminder of what the good times were like. It was all so easy back then. Wei Wuxian was bright, happy. They were all brighter, happier, carefree. There was no war. Their home was intact. There was nothing to worry about but the lectures.

He ignored the glare from Jin Zixuan. So what if he also started at Caiyi Town? The way he acted was disgraceful and he should be embarrassed about it.

**He caught up on a bridge, “A-Jie, we had a long journey from Yunmeng and we’re exhausted. I think we can find a tavern and get some rest, and then go to Cloud Recesses in order to keep a good image.”**

**“Sure,”** His sister agreed, **“There are ten more days before the ceremony. It’s been a long journey, let’s rest here.”**

**“Are we going to stay here for awhile?”** Wei Wuxian asked with a laugh, **“I heard the Emperor’s Smile liquor of Gusu is the most famous one. It tastes soft, yet full-bodied. Drink it to forget all your worries. I’ve been wanting it for a long time. Now, I can finally taste it.”**

Lan Xichen hid a smile. Oh, he'd certainly gotten to drink it in the very place it was forbidden.

He found himself surprisingly at ease in this viewing. The only stake he had in the truth was his little brother's heart. He was prepared to help Wangji deal with the heartbreak that would come if Wei Wuxian was revealed to be guilty.

If Wei Wuxian was innocent, then he would gladly support their union and offer his Sect's support to the mistreated Wens and their protector.

**“Wei Wuxian,”** Jiang Cheng said, **“Don’t drink.”**

**“I have to,”** The older boy protested, **“Drinking can ease one’s mind. Why stop me?”**

**“You!”** Jiang Cheng cut himself off, **“Father shouldn’t have let you come.”**

**“You!”** Wei Wuxian started, but didn't continue, dropping into a sulk.

**“Quiet,”** Jiang Yanli interjected, **“Both of you. Let’s find a tavern first.”**

**“Wei Wuxian,” Jiang Cheng continued anyways, “Remember to-”**

**“I know,” He interrupted, “I can even recite your words now. I have to go.”**

**Jiang Cheng started to yell after him, before shaking his head and gesturing in frustration, “A-Jie, look at him. I have a feeling that he will definitely make trouble at Cloud Recesses.”**

**Jiang Yanli sighed in sympathy, “A-Xian was born high-spirited. It’s not a bad thing. Father also says so sometimes.”**

**Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, “A-Jie, you and Father always defend him.”**

**She looked away, “There’s no way he would change his attitude. Besides, we, the Jiang Sect of Yunmeng, have always been told to be free, right?”**

And yet, they were all constrained by the rules of their world. Nie Huaisang fluttered his fan to hide his sadness. If Jiang Fengmian truly favored Wei Wuxian over Jiang Cheng, it was because of how the former had the courage to stand against the world if it meant doing the right thing, while Jiang Cheng bowed to external pressure.

There was nothing wrong with that, of course. A Sect Leader needed to bow to external pressure, otherwise they would turn out like Wen Ruohan. If he listened to no one but himself, nothing but his heart then the Jiang Sect would be at risk.

Wei Wuxian was allowed to be free in a way none of his peers were, which was why he stood out so much.

**With that, they walked away, and the memory faded into the next. It focused on the Jiang Sect disciples standing in the front room of a tavern. Wei Wuxian looked angry, “Waiter, what happened? Why did you suddenly run out?”**

**The waiter shifted, “Sir. That was not our intention at all. An influential young man suddenly came here today. He booked the whole tavern and drove everyone out, except his people. Sir, I’m sorry, but I think it’s better you find another tavern.”**

**Before they could respond, MianMian walked in, “Waiter!”**

Madame Jin narrowed her eyes at her son, “You bought out an entire tavern?”

Jin Zixuan refused to look at her. He was accustomed to a certain style of living, and the only way to ensure that while abroad was to have the entire building to himself. It wasn’t like they didn’t have the money to spare.

**The waiter scurried over to them, “Oh, ladies. According to your orders, all rooms have been tidied. And we have also sent other guests away.”**

**MianMian smiled, “Please take these perfume bags and put them in Young Master Jin’s room. The chopped herbs inside can keep mosquitoes at bay.”**

**“MianMian, how considerate you are,” Her companion commented, “No wonder our young master favors you.”**

**MianMian looked at her severely, “Stop that.”**

A few whispered about that comment. They thought Luo Qingyang left the Jin Sect because of her connection to the Yiling Patriarch, but the timing was such that she could have left because Jin Zixuan began his official courtship with Jiang Yanli.

MianMian ducked her head. So far, not many recognized her in the brown robes she’d taken to wearing as a rogue cultivator.

If Nie Huaisang had been able to find her, she would have given her memories to this worthy endeavor. However, she only heard about this by chance and had to rush to make it to Lanling in time. She planned to congratulate her friends on their child eventually, but when there were less people. She didn’t want more rumors to start.

Rumors ruined everything.

**Her companion addressed the waiter, “You should be careful about this. Our young master is widely renowned.”**

**The waiter smiled, “Please rest assured. I fully understand.”**

**MianMian turned to her companion, “Let’s go. Let’s check our young master’s room.”**

**The waiter led them away, and Wei Wuxian crossed his arms as he watched them go. For a moment, none of them spoke before Jiang Cheng opened his mouth, “I see. They are the LanlingJin. They must be here for the lecture too and are planning to rest in Caiyi Town.”**

**“Jiang-gongzi,” One of their disciples complained, “Only a few members of the Jin Sect will occupy the whole tavern, and yet they still want the whole place. There’s no vacant tavern left in town. We have no choice.”**

“How wasteful,” Was muttered by many around the room.

The minor Sects had been bullied by the major Sects often. They were very familiar with how certain Sects would arrive on scene and push them out of the picture. They used their wealth and reputations to steal nighthunts.

It was strange to see it happen to another major Sect, but they realized it was never the Jiang Sect that overstepped.

**Wei Wuxian moved towards the staircase, catching the two young ladies as they walked out of a room, “Lady MianMian!” He called out, causing both to turn back and look at him. He made his way up the stairs with a smile, “May I have one of your perfume bags?”**

**MianMian regarded him suspiciously, “Who are you? Who gave you the right to call me MianMian?”**

**His smile faded a little, then he pointed at her companion, “It’s her. She called you MianMian. Why can’t I?”**

**“Who on earth are you?” MianMian demanded, “Don’t call me that!”**

**“Alright,” Wei Wuxian almost pouted, “How about you tell me your real name? I won’t call you MianMian then.”**

**She looked away indignantly, “Why should I tell you? You should say your own name before asking somebody else’s.”**

**“That’s easy,” He crossed his arms, “I’ll say my name. Keep this in mind. My name is Yuandao.”**

**Both girls looked confused, muttering, “Yuandao,” to themselves.**

**Her companion drew her aside, “MianMian,” She leaned closer, “I can’t remember which clan’s young master bears this name. But judging from his looks and demeanor, he doesn’t seem like a nobody.” They were both oblivious to Wei Wuxian’s smile in the background.**

**MianMian’s eyes widened, and she turned around, “You! You teased me!” Then, remembering herself, she looked down in embarrassment. Wei Wuxian’s smile grew.**

**Lan Wangji tensed. He was well aware of Wei Wuxian’s reputation as a flirt, but it was different to watch him in action. He closed his eyes. This was before they met. This was Lady Luo, who was brilliant and fierce. She was too good for the Jin Sect, and this would only prove her denouncement was well-deserved.**

**It would take time before they reached the parts he didn’t understand about Wei Ying. Until then, he would soak as much warmth from these memories as he could.**

**“What happened?” Her friend asked.**

**MianMian continued to glare at Wei Wuxian as she answered, “Think about poetry. What’s next to ‘green, green, the riverside grass’?”**

**“Green, green, the riverside grass. Long, long, missing that far road,” Her friend recited, finally realizing and looking at Wei Wuxian as well.**

**“Don’t say that out loud!” MianMian scolded while her friend laughed. She glared at Wei Wuxian, “Who would miss you?” Before remembering she didn’t know who he was and looked away again in embarrassment, “How shameless.”**

**Wei Wuxian tilted his head, “So, Lady MianMian, you came from LanlingJin, right?”**



**People say that girls from the Jin Sect are as pretty as fairies.” She blushed slightly, continuing to avert her gaze, “Now that I have seen one, I can’t agree more.”**

**She smiled despite herself, “So clever.”**

It was a sudden reminder to all that Wei Wuxian managed to rank fourth amongst the eligible young masters without being a Sect Leader or Sect Heir. He managed to rank extremely high without a fortune or position to back him up. He got there purely on his looks and skill.

And he was the only one willing to flirt. Lan Xichen would smile, but there was a certain coldness to his politeness that was impossible to overlook. It wasn’t as obvious as Lan Wangji’s, who was rumored to be able to freeze those who came too close. Then came Jin Zixuan, who was arrogant and spoiled. None of them knew how to talk to those of lower stations.

Not like Wei Wuxian did.

**Wei Wuxian’s gaze darted to her companion before he saluted them, “I am Wei Ying from the YunmengJiang. My courtesy name is Wuxian. We’re going to the GusuLan for the lecture and resting in Caiyi Town. As fellow cultivators, surely Lady MianMian won’t bear to see us sleep in the streets.”**

**Her eyebrows went up slightly as she nodded, “Oh,” She stared at him, “So, Master Yuandao, you do have a decent name.” He smiled, “However, as for the rooms...”**

**Her friend drew her aside again, “MianMian. Our young master won’t bring a lot of people here anyway. These rooms are vacant for no reason. Not to mention, they arrived earlier.”**

**MianMian nodded in agreement, and they turned back to Wei Wuxian, “As is the case, Wei-gongzi, you and your party may stay. And I won’t bother our young master with this.”**

**Wei Wuxian bowed, “Ladies, much obliged.”**

Was Wei Wuxian that charming, or were there Jin disciples aware of how arrogant their actions were?

“It’s a pity MianMian left,” Someone muttered.

“She was the only one with any sense,” Another commented back.

**They returned his bow, and the memory jumped to the siblings in a room.**

**Jiang Cheng spoke first, “Only a frivolous playboy like you could take the rooms back from those girls.” He tossed his pack onto one of the beds.**

**Wei Wuxian sat by the table, “Shijie, listen to what he said!” He pointed at him with his sword, “Jiang Cheng, I’ll generously take that as you being jealous of me.”**

The once scattered laughter slowly spread. They couldn't help it. Wei Wuxian was entertaining, and it was always fun to see the more famous cultivators acting like regular people. It made them seem less like gods.

Sandu Shengshou was once a moody teenager who grouched at his brother.

The Yiling Patriarch was once a carefree flirt who enjoyed teasing everyone he encountered.

**Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes.**

**“How about you two fight here and now?” Jiang Yanli commented.**

**Jiang Cheng huffed and looked away. Wei Wuxian poured himself a drink, “But, Shijie, who is the Jin-gongzi that MianMian mentioned?”**

**“Who else could it be?” The youngest asked, “They’re about the same age as we are and from the Jin Sect. If it’s not the youngest one, Jin Zixuan, who else could it be?”**

**Jiang Yanli smiled and turned away. Wei Wuxian continued, “I just wonder if Jin-gongzi is still as fancy as he was when he was a child.”**

**Jiang Cheng smiled and shook his head.**

**“Fancy?” Nie Huaisang asked.**

**“He got upset when we pushed him into the lake,” Jiang Cheng answered, “I’ve never seen a child who cared so much about clothes.”**

**“Fancy indeed,” Nie Mingjue muttered.**

Jin Zixuan let all the comments slide. He deserved that and more for what he was about to do. He closed his eyes. His mother had just stopped glaring at him. She would set him on fire once she found out he knew his fiancée needed a room in Caiyi Town and still turned her out on the street.

He was a dead man walking.

**Wei Wuxian didn't have time for a drink before they noticed the waiter walking in, “Excuse me, I'm terribly sorry, but there aren't enough rooms. Please leave these rooms as well.”**

**The siblings exchanged looks, but started to gather their things. As they were leaving, they encountered the Jin Sect. Jin Zixuan stared at Jiang Yanli, and almost looked like he was going to say something, before he saluted, “YungmengJiang, pleased to meet you.”**

**They returned the greeting, then Jiang Cheng spoke, “I suppose Jin-xiong is also going to the Lan Sect as a student?”**

**“Mind your manners,” One of the Jin disciples spoke, “Our young master is Jin-gongzi-”**

**Jin Zixuan held up a hand for silence, “Jiang-gongzi is also passing by this place?”**

**“Yes, we need to rest here,” Jiang Cheng kept his face neutral.**

**“Unfortunately,” The same Jin Sect disciple spoke, “Every room in this tavern has been booked by us, the LanlingJin. You guys better go elsewhere.”**

**“Hey,” Wei Wuxian started, “We arrived earlier.”**

**“You were earlier, so what?” The disciple asked back, “You should go complain to the owner.” Wei Wuxian looked to the Sect Heir, “Anyway, we booked the whole tavern. Our young master would rather not have associations with some random folks.”**

**“How arrogant.”**

Jin Guangyao agreed. He knew the Jin Sect’s reputation would take a hit watching Wei Wuxian’s memories, but it was a well deserved hit. He hoped those in gold around the room felt as uncomfortable as Jin Zixuan looked. This sort of behavior wasn’t supported outside of Lanling. Everyone only treated them politely because of their power.

**Wei Wuxian scoffed, while Jiang Yanli just looked sad. Jin Zixuan couldn’t look at her anymore. Wei Wuxian replied, “As for the lecture of the Lan Sect, there are only a few slots available for each Sect. Jin-gongzi, you brought out a grand display with so many people. What’s your purpose?”**

**“We’re Jin-gongzi’s servants,” The disciple juttred his chin up, “What’s wrong?”**

**“Oh,” Wei Wuxian peered at the large group, “So it’s true that the Jin Sect is ostentatious.” He looked at Jiang Cheng while Jin Zixuan rolled his eyes. Wei Wuxian moved closer, “But I heard the Lan Sect was strict and puritanical. Jin-gongzi has so many retinues. I’m really afraid you couldn’t stand that kind of suffering.” He patted the Jin heir on the shoulder.**

Jin Zixuan pointedly ignored the snickering at the veiled insult.

**“You aren’t that arrogant boy anymore,” His wife comforted.**

Was he? He came to see his wife as the irreplaceable angel she was, but he was still aloof. A-Li knew the names of all her servants. She could tell him the names of the family members of their cooks. She was down to earth in a way he couldn’t imagine being. Didn’t that make him arrogant still?

If Wei Wuxian was right, if his Sect mistreated the prisoners they took, he never would have noticed because he wasn’t involved in his own Sect. His father still controlled everything, and if it wasn’t controlled by him, it was relegated to Jin Guangyao. In comparison, he was pampered and sheltered.

**“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli warned as Jin Zixuan rolled the hand off his shoulder.**

**“Shijie,” Wei Wuxian returned to their side, “I’m just giving a friendly suggestion.”**

**“How dare you insult our young master,” The disciple drew his sword, “Where are the manners of the Jiang Sect?”**

**“How did I insult him?” Wei Wuxian asked calmly, “Tell me. You can confront me, but don’t involve the YunmengJiang.”**

**“So distant, already,” Jiang Cheng muttered.**

Did Wei Wuxian always believe they would abandon him if he made things difficult? Even back then, did he think they would let him stand alone?

He glanced at his sister, who also noted the words and pursed her lips.

**The disciple, embarrassed, sheathed his sword.**

**There was another awkward silence as Jiang Yanli continued to stare at her betrothed, as though silently asking him to let them stay. Realizing he wouldn’t, she looked to her brothers, “A-Xian, A-Cheng. Go pack up. We’ll find another place.” She bowed her head, “Goodbye, Jin-gongzi.” Then she walked into the room.**

**The other two followed after a disapproving once over of Jin Zixuan.**

Madame Jin forced herself to look down at her grandson. Living, breathing evidence that her son grew up and out of his juvenile resentment of his engagement. He fell in love with A-Li of his own accord, not because of any arrangement made in his infancy.

She would have words with her son. If his attitude here reflected what he acted like on Phoenix Mountain...then it would be embarrassing for all of them when she took his side there. All she saw was a platonic, sibling connection between Wei Wuxian and A-Li.

**Wei Wuxian finished packing, then went to check on his sister. She was standing with Jin Zixuan and the outspoken disciple, the Sect heir bowing in apology, “Sorry, Jiang-guniang, I opened the wrong room.”**

**“You are too humble to say that,” Wei Wuxian interjected before his sister could speak, walking calmly between them, “Isn’t the whole tavern yours?” He crossed his arms and leaned on the doorway. Jin Zixuan nodded and turned to leave, but the head disciple wouldn’t leave it at that.**

**“It is said that the etiquette of the Jin Sect is of high repute,” He called after him, forcing him to pause. Wei Wuxian continued, “Now, I can say otherwise.”**

**Jin Zixuan flicked his robes and left.**

Heads nodded without thought. If this was how the Jin Sect Heir treated his betrothed, it was no wonder the previous Sect Leader Jiang broke it. It was also no wonder Wei Wuxian snapped at the banquet. If this was how the Jin Sect treated other major Sects, it made sense why he would accuse them of thinking themselves above the rest.

It truly was discourteous.

**Wei Wuxian sneered after him, while Jiang Yanli just looked increasingly sad. As they left the tavern, Jiang Yanli wandered away from the group with the other female disciples.**

**Jiang Cheng scowled, “That Jin Zixuan, he is so arrogant.”**

**“Yes,” Wei Wuxian agreed, “He is flaunting himself just like a peacock.” He paused, “It’s a pity that I couldn’t even touch the pot of Emperor’s Smile.”**

**“Think about our situation,” Jiang Cheng scolded, “Are you thinking about drinking now?” Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes, but the Sect Heir continued, “Did you see the look on A-Jie’s face?” They both stared after her, his lips tightening in worry.**

**Wei Wuxian sighed, “I just don’t know what Jiang-zongzhu was thinking. Why did he arrange a marriage between Shijie and that peacock?”**

**They stared at each other for a moment, then shrugged.**

**“Did you have to share this?” Jin Zixuan finally demanded.**

**“Of course,” Jiang Cheng crossed his arms, “You’ll see.”**

Jiang Yanli bit her lip. It was true he hurt her feelings repeatedly, but she didn’t agree with her brothers about lording his immaturity over him for the rest of their lives. Then again, perhaps it was worth showing how much some people did change, to highlight how little some people didn’t.

Or maybe, to show how the war didn’t change all of them for the worse.

**The memory jumped to the Jiang disciples standing before two Lan Sect guards. One was speaking, “According to the Lan Sect’s principles, everyone coming for the lecture won’t be allowed inside without an invitation.”**

**Wei Wuxian sighed, “Sir, I’ve told you a thousand times. We accidentally lost our invitations. We never intended to lose them. What’s more, we’re all standing here. Why would we lie to you?”**

**“Sir,” The disciple said, “I can’t identify you people without an invitation.”**

Jiang Yanli grabbed her husband’s hand, “We forgot the invitation at the inn.”

Jin Zixuan sighed deeply, “If I hadn’t kicked you out, you wouldn’t have forgotten it.”

“What does this have to do with the Yin Iron?” Jin Guangshan demanded, starting to get impatient.

They weren’t very far into these memories, but he wanted to know more about Wei Wuxian. He needed to see where he got his power from. If it couldn’t be replicated, then maybe there would be some information in here about how to control him.

He may be the Yiling Patriarch, the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation, but he was still a man.

Every man had their vices. Every man had a price.

“It will soon be revealed,” His daughter-in-law smiled, “Please be patient.”

**Wei Wuxian sighed again, looking up at the sky, “Look, the sun is about to set. You can’t just have us sleep on the streets, can you? How about this? Please fetch your Sect Leader. He has seen Shijie. Then, he will know we’re being honest.”**

**“Well then, please wait here for a moment until we change shifts at 5:45.”**

**“At 5:45?” Wei Wuxian repeated incredulously, “The sun would have already set then.”**

**“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli interjected, “Behave yourself.”**

**He stepped towards her, “But Shijie...”**

**“As Father instructed, no matter what, we can’t forget our manners,” She said. Wei Wuxian was begrudgingly chastised, looking back between his siblings and the Lan disciple. She continued, “Let’s leave the gate and plan for our next step.”**

**Jiang Cheng nodded, but before they could depart they noticed the approach of another group. Leading the group was Lan Wangji. He didn’t acknowledge their existence as he passed, but the Jiang Sect disciples were in awe.**

Lan Xichen leaned forward. This was their first meeting. Something about Wei Wuxian caught Wangji’s interest.

Jiang Cheng scowled. This was the beginning of their obsession with each other.

An obsession that destroyed Lotus Pier.

**“Lan-er-gongzi, welcome back.” The guard saluted.**

**“Who is looking for trouble?” Lan Wangji asked.**

**Jiang Cheng leaned closer to his brother, “That must be Lan-er-gongzi, one of the Twin Jades, and the younger brother of their Sect Leader, Lan Xichen.”**

**“He must be our key to getting in,” Wei Wuxian whispered back.**

Many around the room started whispering. Hanguang-Jun and the Yiling Patriarch's relationship was highly disputed.

Most assumed they had to be enemies. One was the epitome of righteousness, the example of what a cultivator should be. The other was the scorned demonic cultivator who rebelled against orthodoxy. Yes, they fought side by side during the war, but many saw them arguing. They assumed Lan Wangji was keeping an eye on Wei Wuxian.

Some heard there may be something more between them. An intimacy that bordered on indecent. But if there was any truth in those rumors, certainly it was some wicked trick Wei Wuxian pulled.

**The rest of the Lan disciples then appeared, carrying a figure on a stretcher. He was unconscious, the only sign of injury the strange marks going up the side of his neck and face. The guard looked at the figure, "What happened?"**

**"Just carry him inside," Lan Wangji ordered.**

**"How did he end up like this?" Jiang Cheng muttered.**

**"End?" Wei Wuxian repeated, "I don't think he's dead. He's cursed by some wicked sorcery."**

**"Wicked sorcery?" Jiang Cheng repeated back.**

They all recognized the effects of the Yin Iron on a person.

So this was how Wei Wuxian was brought into it.

Jin Zixuan sighed deeply. If he hadn't been an asshole, then they would have been resting in the inn. They wouldn't have been at the entrance of the Cloud Recesses. Wei Wuxian wouldn't have seen the victim. He knew his wife's brother well enough to know that he couldn't mind his own business. If he saw a problem, he tried to help.

**Their conversation drew Lan Wangji's attention, and he slowly turned around to face them. His attention was focused on Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian stared back, looking almost surprised at the deadpan stare.**

**Jiang Cheng glanced between the two of them, before stepping forward, "Lan-er-gongzi, I am Jiang Cheng from the YungmengJiang, son of Sect Leader Jiang Fengmian. This is my sister, Jiang Yanli." She stepped forward, "My shixiong, Wei Ying or Wei Wuxian."**

**Wei Wuxian stepped forward with a smile, and Lan Wangji continued to stare at him.**

So they were always this ridiculous.

Jin Guangyao took little comfort in that. These were the rumors no one could confirm, and Er-ge refused to speak of them. If Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were caught in some tragic

romance...

Well, no one liked the people who got between fated partners.

**“Lan-er-gongzi, we’ve heard a lot about you,” Jiang Cheng finished, and then they saluted.**

**He returned the greeting, “It is an honor.”**

**“Lan-er-gongzi,” Jiang Cheng continued, “We accidentally lost our invitation. It’s getting late and it’s inconvenient to sleep outside. Please make a merciful exception for us.”**

**Without pause, Lan Wangji replied, “No invitation, no entry.”**

**The siblings paused, surprised at the rejection. Wei Wuxian spoke, “Lan-er-gongzi, we came all the way from Yunmeng. Despite the exhausting journey, we still made it to Cloud Recesses before sunset. You just turned us down for an invitation. Don’t you think it’s a little rigid?”**

**“No invitation, no entry,” Lan Wangji repeated.**

**“Lan-er-gongzi, it was an accident,” Wei Wuxian kept trying, “We never intended to lose it. Please make an exception.”**

**“Find it and come back,” Lan Wangji replied.**

So rigid.

Just as the minor Sects were surprised at how Jin Zixuan treated the Jiang Sect representatives, so were they surprised at Lan Wangji’s treatment of them. They’d heard they were strict, of course. Any place with three thousand rules of conduct needed to be strict.

But this was ridiculous.

**“Lan-er-gongzi,” Wei Wuxian looked away, “The sun is about to set, and we are more than 20 miles away from Caiyi Town. You’re asking us to find it now. What an imposition!”**

**Before he was finished, Lan Wangji turned away and passed through the gate.**

**“Hey!” Wei Wuxian raised his voice, “Lan-er-gongzi! In the worst case scenario, we can-”**

**He was cut off when his mouth sealed shut. He continued trying to talk, and the Lan disciple took pity on him, “Lan-er-gongzi has put the Silence spell on you. No one can remove it except the Lan and it dispels automatically after a stick of incense’s time.”**



**Wei Wuxian slowly turned to his brother with a look of frustration. He grabbed Jiang Cheng's robes and shook him, while Jiang Yanli looked on in concern.**

It would have been funny if it weren't so rude.

Lan Xichen closed his eyes and sighed. He wished the others could see how confused his brother was, that he responded to the emotions Wei Wuxian provoked by being stubborn and needlessly enforcing the rules.

They would see soon that he wasn't quite that bad.

**The memory moved away to show Lan Wangji standing further up the staircase. He could still hear Wei Wuxian's muffled shouts, and he paused, almost turning around.**

**It went back to the Jiang disciples sitting around a fire complaining about Lan Wangji and Cloud Recesses. They already missed Yunmeng.**

**Jiang Cheng approached his sister with a cloak, carefully wrapping it around her shoulders. She continued to look down the mountain as her brother assured her, "A-Jie, don't worry. He just went back to the tavern for the invitation. Everything will be fine."**

**She nodded, but didn't go near the fire, "I'm just worried..."**

**Jiang Cheng grimaced, "A-Jie, Jin Zixun is typical of his kind. Don't worry too much."**

"What is that supposed to mean?" Jin Zixun demanded.

"I think we all know what he meant," Nie Huaisang answered with a roll of his eyes.

He might be the pampered Young Master of Qinghe, but he didn't strut about like his clan and wealth made him better than everyone else. It was people like Jin Zixun and Wen Chao that led to the minor Sects resenting them.

"Huaisang," His brother scolded half-heartedly.

He fluttered his fan. There was something off about Jin Zixun. Maybe he was stressed about the truth of Qionggong Pass coming to light? Or maybe something else was wrong with him?

**She shook her head, "It's not that. I'm just worried Jin-gongzi will embarrass A-Xian because of his character."**

**Jiang Cheng smiled slightly, "As long as he is fine with others, nobody will embarrass him. It's hard to say he is not having fun with some MianMian or some Yuandao now."**

Lan Wangji noted the words. Wei Ying was a well-known flirt. Everyone knew he would sweet talk the nearest pretty woman. But his brother just admitted he was as likely to be fooling around with a pretty woman as a pretty man. He always felt their connection went both ways, but it was nice to know his romantic advances might be welcome.

**She smiled tightly at that, “A-Cheng, you know that A-Xian always takes things seriously when they’re important.” His lips tightened in acknowledgement, and she looked away. Lan Wangji approached them, and Jiang Yanli moved to face him, “Lan-er-gongzi?”**

So they weren’t that rigid.

**The memory faded to Wei Wuxian approaching the camp, two jars of alcohol hanging over his shoulder. He noticed the still smoking campfire and called out, “Shijie! Jiang Cheng!” He waited for a moment, then carried on. He swung the jars at his side as he approached the gate, looking around for a guard this time, “Where is everybody?”**

**He smiled, then walked through the gate, immediately repelled by the wards. He put a hand to his forehead in pain, then prodded the wards curiously. He checked for any weak point, then placed his hands on his hips, “No wonder nobody’s here.” He took a few steps back then traced a talisman. It activated as a swarm of butterflies, breaking through the wards.**

**He nodded in satisfaction as he walked in, hitting his sword on the back of his neck, “Wards are made to be broken.”**

Nie Mingjue raised an eyebrow at the ease he broke through the wards. He’d have to assess the strength of the Unclean Realm’s.

He wasn’t the only one thinking such at the display. Wei Wuxian’s power extended far beyond just the demonic. He was the most skilled with talismans of any generation. His ability to invent new ones was unparalleled. Even the strongest, oldest defenses would be vulnerable to his genius.

If he turned against them.

But it had been a year since Qiongg Pass. While there were rumors of him digging up graves and amassing an army, he hadn’t struck at any of the nearby minor Sects. Perhaps he truly was just biding his time, waiting for them to drop their defenses on their own before he struck.

Could such a carefree person turn into a cunning strategist?

**It skipped to him climbing onto the roof. He glanced around the courtyard before grinning and pulling himself up all the way. Then he looked to his left, and startled when he noticed Lan Wangji glaring at him. He laughed, “What a coincidence! We meet again.”**

**Lan Wangji just continued staring coldly at him.**

**“Lan-er-gongzi. You are out at this hour.” He chattered nervously, then pointed up, “Are you going to admire the moon?” At the continued silence his smile fell to a more**

serious look, “Lan-er-gongzi, I came for my Shijie. Oh, right. I found the invitation. It’s right here. I’ll show you.” He reached into his robes.

**“Breaking through the wards, it’s a violation of the Lan Sect’s principles,” Lan Wangji finally spoke.**

**“What?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

Many felt the same. After all, he was the head disciple of the Jiang Sect. Part of his job was to protect the heirs. It made sense for him to break in if there was no one to speak to at the gate. What if they hadn’t been brought inside? What if something else attacked them without leaving traces of a fight? Maybe he had faith in his fellow disciples...

It was worry enough to justify breaking the rule.

Especially when all Hanguang-Jun needed to do was tell him he’d brought Jiang Yanli and Jiang Wanyin inside.

**“Those who come at night should not be allowed in until 7,” Lan Wangji continued, “Two violations of the Lan Sect’s principles. Unauthorized carrying of alcohol.” Wei Wuxian’s hand went to defensively clutch the alcohol, “Three violations of the Lan Sect’s principles.”**

**“Lan-er-gongzi,” Wei Wuxian started slowly, “I am new to the Lan Sect of Gusu and not familiar with the rules.” He held three fingers towards the sky, “But I swear these things won’t happen again.” His hand went down, “Also, I was just in a hurry to find Shijie and Jiang Cheng.” He looked around, then smiled, “How about this?”**

**“Just let me in for a glimpse. Just one glimpse.” He held up one finger with a smile and a nod, then moved to stand up.**

**Immediately, there was a blade at his throat.**

Jiang Cheng slapped his own forehead, “I can’t believe you actually fought on the roof.”

Though he should have expected it. If he didn’t know where his siblings were, he would have fought anyone to make sure they were safe. Honestly, the Lan Sect should be relieved he assumed they were safe in Cloud Recesses rather than tearing up the woods looking for potential threats.

“He shouldn’t have broken through the wards,” Nie Mingjue commented.

“Da-ge,” Nie Huaisang whined, “Like you wouldn’t have done the same if I went missing.”

**Wei Wuxian laughed nervously, “Well then,” He put a hand on the pommel of the blade, “This Emperor’s Smile. I’ll spare one pot for you.” He held it out, “Forget about this, deal?”**

**“Attempting to bribe a law enforcer,” Lan Wangji did not look interested, “Doubly guilty.”**

**Wei Wuxian's smile faded into an irritated look, "Lan-er-gongzi, are you seriously so inflexible? When we were at the gate, you put the Silence spell on me for no reason. You are somehow responsible for that case, right?" As he spoke, he pushed the blade back into its sheath. Then he jumped off the roof.**

"Couldn't he have just explained he was worried?" Lan Xichen asked.

Jiang Cheng scoffed, "Would we have to resort to this if he would explain things?"

"Doesn't he get his silence just makes everything worse?" Jin Zixuan wondered.

Jiang Yanli sighed, "A-Xian doesn't understand that what's obvious to him isn't obvious to others, but here...he's already decided Hanguang-Jun won't listen to his reasons anyways."

"So he just does what he wants," Jiang Cheng scowled.

**Lan Wangji tried to strike at him, only to have his blade blocked by Wei Wuxian's sheathed weapon. He jumped away, continuing to dodge and block his attacks with ease. They danced across the rooftops.**

**Wei Wuxian looked at the alcohol in his hands, "*I didn't expect that fuddy-duddy to have real skills.*" He stared at Lan Wangji, then spoke, "I'm occupied today. Excuse me." Then turned and ran, immediately being chased by the other. They continued to fight, Lan Wangji forcing the jars into the air then cutting the cord connecting them.**

**Wei Wuxian managed to catch one in his hand, but failed to balance the other on his sword. He watched it crash with a sad pout. He looked up angrily, "Lan Zhan! Pay for my Emperor's Smile!"**

It was an impressive display of both of their abilities, but everyone knew they were impressive fighters.

What they didn't know was how calm Wei Wuxian was. Even with his siblings missing and an unfair attack from Hanguang-Jun, he still wasn't taking this seriously. He chose to go for his alcohol. He chose not to draw his own blade for a real fight. He didn't get angry until one of the jars broke, and even then, it wasn't real anger.

Was his temperament corrupted by the resentful energy he used?

Or had they done something to truly make him angry?

**Lan Wangji descended from the rooftop, and he clutched the remaining jar closer. All the Lan said was, "Turn around."**

**Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes suspiciously, "What?" But he did turn, discovering the wall of rules behind him. The fight completely forgotten, he approached the engraving. He read them for a moment, then looked back, "What is this?"**

**"The principles of the GusuLan," Lan Wangji answered.**

**“This many?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**“Put it down,” Lan Wangji ordered, “Since you came for the lectures, let’s count how many principles you have violated tonight.”**

**Wei Wuxian sighed and shook his head, “Well, I’m so fortunate that I wasn’t born into the stiff and horrible Lan Sect of GusuLan.” He still smirked after saying that, then he flew to the roof, “Liquor is forbidden in Cloud Recesses. Well, I can stay outside and sit here to drink. This won’t count, right?”**

Another chitter of laughter. How clever!

Where was this witty humor now?

**Lan Wangji glared up at him as he removed the seal and started to drink from the jar, “So disobedient.”**

**“The female cultivators in every Sect are all admiring the famous Lan-er-gongzi.” He shook his head, “What a pity.”**

**“Pity?” Lan Wangji repeated with a straight face.**

**“What a pity that they don’t know the person they are admiring-” The humor slipped from his expression to reveal his dislike of the other, “-is a relentless, unreasonable, and rigid guy.” He huffed, but his smile was back, “But it doesn’t matter. When I go back to Yunmeng, I’m going to-”**

**He was cut off by the Silencing spell again, forcing him down from the roof so he could gesture at the other to remove it.**

So they didn’t get along.

Nothing Wei Wuxian said was untrue. Hanguang-Jun was being stubborn at that moment. A few words and the situation would have been diffused.

**“Let’s go,” Lan Wangji commanded, walking away, forcing Wei Wuxian to follow.**

Lan Wangji stared forward. He knew they didn’t get off to the best start. He’d never met anyone like Wei Ying before. Wei Ying flagrantly disobeyed the rules. He looked for loopholes instead of honoring the principles on which the rules were made. He did it all with a charming smile and a fighting style that was like the waters of Yunmeng itself, fluid and free.

He thought if he acted colder, then Wei Ying would leave him alone. His rigidity scared off all his peers before, and he’d liked the routine of his life.

He still couldn’t believe how welcome of a disruption Wei Ying turned out to be, even if the conflict it brought hurt. He never would have realized how lonely he was until he knew the warmth of his company.

For that, he would always be grateful.

**They made their way to Lan Qiren's office, and Lan Wangji shoved him to the ground upon entry, still silenced. He slowly got into a kneeling position before Lan Qiren's desk. The Lan Sect Leader stood to one side, watching the two ambivalently.**

**"Wei-gongzi," Lan Xichen drew his attention, "Cloud Recesses is not like Lotus Pier." He walked closer to him, "There are many rules indeed. You are new here. I can't blame the innocent, but under no circumstances can I defame our principles." He turned away, "So punishment is inevitable. As for how...Wangji, it's up to you."**

**Lan Wangji answered, "Transcribe the principles three hundred times."**

**Wei Wuxian tried to protest, but couldn't.**

Three hundred times? How outrageous!

This was all just a misunderstanding!

**"Wangji, just dispel the Silence spell on Wei-gongzi," Lan Xichen said.**

**The first words out of Wei Wuxian's mouth were, "You fuddy-duddy!" He smiled, then turned to Lan Xichen, "Zewu-Jun, listen to me. What Lan Zhan said was totally wrong. He is such a fool. If one word is enough, he won't say two words. Let me speak." He rose and approached Lan Qiren's desk, "The truth is, my party and I arrived-"**

**He placed his sword on the desk, then hesitantly pulled it back at the indignant look on the elder's face, "-at the gate of Cloud Recesses at dusk, only to find that our invitation was lost. But actually, it's not our fault." He turned away angrily, "It's all that peacock Jin Zixuan's fault. Anyway, we made it to the gate but weren't able to get in."**

**He continued pacing, "We had no choice, so I went back for the invitation alone." He hesitated slightly, "And the Emperor's Smile from Gusu is so well-known. It's only reasonable that I bought two pots, isn't it? However, I hadn't even taken one sip before Lan Zhan broke one of them. Before I could even get compensation...You know what? He put the Silence spell on me."**

"He really is terrible at explaining things," Huaisang commented.

Lan Xichen was inclined to agree. Wei Wuxian just seemed so...eloquent. He didn't struggle to find words when it came to compliments or explaining his theories about cultivation. But his words failed him where it truly mattered. He couldn't explain coherently why he'd broken the rules.

He didn't explain where he got the Stygian Tiger Amulet, nor where he was for three months.

"It's like he wants us to think the worst of him," Jin Zixuan agreed.

"Maybe he believes you already do," A-Yao cut in gently.

**Lan Wangji just stared, stone-faced, back at him. Lan Xichen replied, “Wei-gongzi, anyhow, you have violated our principles first, so you can’t blame Wangji for that. Also, Jiang-guniang and Jiang-gongzi have gotten in all thanks to Wangji who explained to me-”**

**“Xiongzhang,” Lan Wangji interrupted.**

“What do you mean?” Jiang Cheng demanded.

Jin Guangshan’s bastard raised his eyebrows, “As Madam Jiang said, he knows what he says won’t change what Hanguang-Jun thinks of him. Grandmaster Lan and Er-ge will listen to Hanguang-Jun before a stranger. So why bother?”

“Shouldn’t he at least try?” Nie Huaisang asked.

Jin Guangyao shook his head, “People were always going to think the worst of him, and he doesn’t seem like the type of person with the patience to fix it.”

**Lan Xichen glanced at his little brother, but Wei Wuxian approached him with a smile, “They got in?”**

**Lan Xichen nodded.**

**Wei Wuxian’s smile faded, “He let them in?”**

**Lan Xichen raised his eyebrows slightly in confirmation, smiling a little.**

**Wei Wuxian returned the smile, then turned back to look at Lan Wangji. He brought his hands behind his back and slowly approached the other boy, “So you aren’t that grim.” Lan Wangji’s hand clenched tighter on his sword, drawing it between them, “Hey, Lan Zhan, are you serious? I am sorry, okay?”**

**Lan Wangji said nothing.**

Wei Wuxian’s opinion of others changed so easily.

Jin Guangyao almost felt sorry for him. He could still feel the Jiang Sect Leader staring at him, wanting clarification for his words, but he didn’t look at him. The fact that they needed clarification just emphasized his complete lack of understanding. He’d always treated Wei Wuxian like a brother. Everyone else who didn’t was wrong.

It was easy to dismiss their treatment of him when Jiang Wanyin thought like that.

Jin Guangyao knew better. People made assumptions simply because of his birth. Most people’s opinions were not so easily changed. They looked at Wei Wuxian and saw the son of a servant at best, the unacknowledged bastard of Jiang Fengmian at worst.

Either way, he was arrogant for daring to act as Jiang Wanyin’s equal, and rude for speaking to those of that station as equals.

It was a pain he understood well. The conundrum of being a person of low birth in a position of high rank.

**“Well, Wei-gongzi,” Lan Xichen broke the silence, “Since it was a misunderstanding, please go back and get some rest.”**

**Wei Wuxian made a face at that, but finally noticed a room connected to the office. There was a body lying on a table, covered by a white sheet. He stared at it, “Zewu-Jun, is he dead? Why is he covered with white cloth?”**

**“What did you say?” Lan Xichen asked.**

**“Am I wrong?” Wei Wuxian asked back, “When I was at the gate this afternoon, he was still alive.”**

**Lan Xichen exchanged a significant look with Lan Qiren.**

The previous discussions were forgotten. Everyone was curious about the Yin Iron. It was a secret for hundreds of years, and by the time it became public knowledge Wen Ruohan had three pieces and the fourth was either with Wei Wuxian or Xue Yang.

Everyone knew Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun at one point went on a journey with their own piece, but no one was certain where they got theirs from. Obviously, it had to be a secret of the Lan Sect, but how did Wei Wuxian manage to get involved? And why would he go through the effort of stealing Xue Yang’s piece when he could have used the Lan Sect’s from the beginning?

Things were finally getting interesting.

## Chapter End Notes

So this is a very different style from my other watch the series fic. Do people prefer the direct transcription? I feel like it works better here because of the amount of people reacting but if it's too bulky it would be less work to be vaguer. Let me know!

Any corrections to the translation are welcome! I do my best to listen to the words being said to get names and titles right, but everything else I have to depend on the subtitles for.



# And Here's Our Wonderful Cultivation Class

## Chapter Notes

Lan Qiren, throwing scrolls: Demonic cultivation isn't real cultivation!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

**The memory abruptly shifted to Wen Qing kneeling before Wen Ruohan's throne. The man himself slowly approached the seat, "The things I just told you, did you get them all?"**

People hissed at the sight of Wen Ruohan. Most had only seen him at discussion conferences, but as he descended into madness he sent Wen Xu as a representative. In the years building up to the war, only those with business in Qishan saw the Wen Sect Leader up close. They certainly hadn't seen him on his throne, the very image of evil.

**"Yes, Your Excellency," Wen Qing answered, "I got them."**

**"I'll send Wen Chao with you," Wen Ruohan decided, "He'll take you to Cloud Recesses. Everything after that is up to you. Remember, the shard of Yin Iron looks exactly the same as the one in Dafan Mountain. You should recognize it. Find it and bring it here."**

**Wen Qing kept her gaze forward, "Your Excellency, I..."**

**He turned around to face her, "Speak."**

**"A-Ning has been frail and feeble since childhood," Wen Qing revealed, "May I take him with me?"**

**"You're worried that he would be treated unfairly in the Nightless City?" Wen Ruohan asked.**

**She bowed her head, "How dare I?"**

**"She's scared," Jiang Cheng commented.**

He hated seeing her terrified like this. He hated how the world lumped her together with her relatives who treated her terribly. What was she supposed to do? If she dared to disobey Wen Ruohan her family would have been killed. If she escaped his wrath, who on their side would have welcomed her? Who could have protected them all?

No one who could would have wanted to. And she was too good to abandon her family.

Not like him.

**“Whatever,” Wen Ruohan dismissed, “Do what you want. Wen Ning has a special constitution. Maybe he could help you when you do the investigation.”**

**She saluted, “Thank you, Your Excellency.”**

**“Your departure is tomorrow,” He continued, “Off you go.”**

**She held the pose, “Understood.” Then she grabbed her sword, bowed, and left. As she did, she walked by a piece of the Yin Iron.**

“So she was a spy,” Nie Huaisang murmured.

“Why else would she have been there?” Nie Mingjue asked.

His little brother frowned, “She wasn’t like the other Wens, Da-ge.”

“Then why didn’t she try to stop her relatives?” He shook his head. A good person opposed evil, even if that evil came from their relatives. She did nothing, and the Wen Sect continued to expand, continued to torture and kill. All while she was safe and secure.

“What if she did?” Huaisang asked.

“Did she?” He didn’t hear of any of her actions. Wei Wuxian mentioned a life debt, but Jiang Wanyin said nothing in her defense.

“I don’t know,” His little brother looked away, “Maybe she did something, but it wasn’t enough. Is she still evil for not being enough? For being one doctor against Wen Ruohan?”

Nie Mingjue didn’t have an answer. If it was brought to light that she did, in her own way, oppose the actions of Wen Ruohan and attempt to help their side in the Sunshot Campaign, then he would come up with one. Otherwise, he highly doubted anyone with the name Wen would take action when they benefited from Wen Ruohan’s tyranny.

**The memory went back to Cloud Recesses, where the sheet was suddenly blown off the body. They looked around, but it appeared to just be the wind. Suddenly, the body on the table sat up.**

**Wei Wuxian examined him. The eyes opened to reveal pure white. He examined it further, then looked towards Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren, “You see? He looks dead.” He placed a hand on his arm, “And he feels like he’s dead, but he’s still affected by the fluctuation of spiritual power. He can’t truly be considered dead. He’s nothing more than...”**

**“Than what?” Lan Xichen asked.**

**Wei Wuxian rubbed at his chin, “It’s hard to say, but he seems to have lost his spiritual cognition.”**

**“Spirit snatch,” Lan Wangji commented.**

**Lan Qiren looked at his nephews, “A puppet.”**

**“Yes,” Wei Wuxian agreed, “He’s like a puppet. A manipulable puppet.”**

And thus his idea of what was possible was expanded. They could see the curiosity in his eyes as he puzzled through the mystery set before him. When did he figure out the trick to manipulating corpses? Was he possibly a demonic cultivator before the Sunshot Campaign even started?

Jiang Yanli’s lips tightened. This was the beginning of the secrets A-Xian kept. He tried to protect them from the coming evil by not letting them know of it. He disappeared with Hanguang-Jun and gave them no explanation.

Then he disappeared alone.

**That was the end of the discussion. The memory skipped to Lan Wangji standing alone in the courtyard. Lan Xichen approached him, “Wangji.” They moved towards each other.**

**Lan Wangji bowed, “Xiongzhang.”**

**“Wangji,” The older brother repeated, “What’s the matter?”**

**“You and Shufu were both preoccupied with that puppet,” Lan Wangji said.**

**“I just had a conversation with Shufu,” Lan Xichen revealed, “The reason remains unknown, but we can preliminarily infer that it must be caused by someone trying wicked sorcery. If it is true, the culprit must be ambitious. Cultivators going missing may just be the start.”**

**“What’s your plan?” The younger brother asked.**

**“For now, we can only investigate,” Lan Xichen said, “But what if...” He trailed off.**

“How long did you know about the Yin Iron?” Nie Mingjue asked.

“Uncle informed me of its existence as soon as I took over the responsibilities as Sect Leader,” Lan Xichen answered easily.

“And you didn’t tell Hanguang-Jun?” His best friend followed up.

He silently shook his head. He wanted to say it was his burden to bear, but it was too close to a lie.

His burden was only the knowledge of its location. Wangji was the one who ended up having to carry it. Wangji was the one to search for more. His little brother’s search resulted in a

broken leg and him alone in the indoctrination camp. Wangji lost the love of his life to its corrupting influence. His heart was at war with his head because he failed as an older brother.

His memories couldn't help prove Wei Wuxian's innocence, but he could make up for all the secrets he didn't tell Wangji back then.

**“Xiongzhong.” Lan Wangji prompted.**

**“Nevermind,” He turned to face him, “Maybe I’m just thinking too much. Wangji, look into the missing case again, but remember, don’t be reckless.”**

**“I know,” Lan Wangji replied, “Please rest assured.”**

**Lan Xichen smiled, “I always am.” He turned away, “Ever since our father’s death, you’ve been becoming more prudent. I sometimes wonder whether I have been too strict on you.”**

**Lan Wangji turned to stand by his side, “You have taken on a lot of duties and I’m just helping with the burden.”**

Jiang Cheng tried not to burn with envy. If he'd been stricter with Wei Wuxian, would he have kept him by his side? Would he have fulfilled his promise to be the Twin Prides of Yunmeng? If he'd forced him to stay within Lotus Pier, to stop drinking and focus, could this all have been prevented?

Nie Huaisang ducked his head to hide his shame. Lan Wangji was always there for his brother in whatever capacity he needed him to be. Wei Wuxian was the same for Jiang Cheng before Wen Qing came between them. Even Jiang Yanli was always present in her support for her brothers, following them out onto the battlefield to organize the food and healers.

He just stayed in the Unclean Realm. He handled domestic matters after San-ge left, but he wished for the type of relationship he saw with the other brothers around him.

**Lan Xichen sighed, “It’s good for you to be with me during the lecture. Many disciples from different sects are the same age as you. It’s time for you to make some friends.” He turned away, “I actually feel good about that Wei-gongzi.” Lan Wangji stared at his face, “Even though he does some excessive things, he is smart, and has a lively and cheerful character.”**

**He turned to look at his little brother, whose expression was inscrutable. Then his gaze flickered down to where Lan Wangji was holding his sword, the hand clenching as though he were repressing a strong emotion. His gaze went back to his face, “Wangji, doesn’t he have some real skills? You two tied against each other?”**

**Instead of answering, Lan Wangji walked away.**

**Lan Xichen watched him leave, then smiled.**

**“You thought they would be friends?” Su She sneered.**

“We are friends,” Lan Wangji responded.

The new Sect Leader scoffed, “The peerless Second Jade of Lan does not stoop to associate with such company.”

“There is no stooping,” He narrowed his eyes, “Brother was right. Wei Ying is my equal.”

“The memories will show us the truth,” Lan Xichen intervened, “There is no point to speculation.”

Others around the room didn’t agree. It was an interesting interaction. Zewu-Jun believed Hanguang-Jun needed friends. Enough to push his brother towards the first suitable candidate.

Zewu-Jun’s friendship with Chifeng-Zun was well known. It was established years ago and continued into the present just as strong, a sworn brotherhood now. Everyone knew Hanguang-Jun was more reserved. He was prone to fewer words, and went into secluded meditation often. He was far more mature and erudite than his peers.

Could it be he was lonely?

All older siblings in the room recognized the smile on Zewu-Jun’s face as his brother walked away in the memory. That was the smile of someone who already decided what was good for their younger sibling and was going to do it regardless of their opinion.

Did it turn out for the best? Or was this just another tragedy in the making?

**The memory restarted in the Orchid Room, with the beginning of the Salute Ceremony. A Lan disciple recited, “The natural world is the origin of everything. Devotion to the principles of the Lan plays a decisive role. Clear reason, inquire doubt, state opinion, summarize wits. The four should admonish you.”**

**The gathered disciples started their bows. The front row consisted of Jiang Yanli, Jiang Cheng, Lan Wangji, and Jin Zixuan. Behind Jiang Yanli sat Nie Huaisang, and behind Jiang Cheng was Wei Wuxian. Lan Qiren sat at the front of the room as his students completed their bows.**

**Then a Lan disciple opened a book, “The 3,500 principles of the Lan.” And started reciting the rules.**

The Lan Sect lectures were famous, but also notoriously limited in who could attend. It was always the sect heirs from the major Sects and their retinues. If someone from a minor Sect managed to gain a good enough reputation at an early age, they might be invited, but no such cultivator had arisen in years.

So people listened attentively to the unexpected bonus.

Knowledge was power, after all, and this information was normally kept to the more powerful Sects.

**Wei Wuxian quickly grew bored, muttering to himself, “There are over 3,000 rules. It will take hours before it’s over.” He stretched in his spot, but stopped when he heard the chirping of a bird.**

**Nie Huaisang looked stressed as around him, the other disciples also picked up on the bird chirps. A few glanced at him, but most fought to pay attention to the recitation. He finally met Wei Wuxian’s gaze, who leaned towards him, “Hey. What rare bird did you hide inside?”**

**Nie Huaisang shushed him, then glanced back at Meng Yao, who just stared back ambivalently. Then they both looked around to see if anyone was staring. After confirming no one was, the smaller man pulled a little cage out from his sleeve with a tiny bird in it.**

**“Huaisang!”**

**“I’m sorry, Da-ge!” Nie Huaisang leaned away from his older brother, “It was such a pretty bird!”**

**“That’s no excuse!”**

**People laughed around the room at the ridiculousness of the situation. Nie Huaisang was well-known for his love of beautiful things.**

**Wei Wuxian beamed, “What’s this?”**

**Nie Huaisang leaned closer, “I found a canary on the way. I followed it for three whole days. What do you think? Isn’t it wonderful?”**

**Three days? That was surprisingly dedicated of the lazy, pampered Young Master of Qinghe.**

**“A-Yao,” Nie Mingjue turned to the host, “Why didn’t you put a stop to this nonsense?”**

**“I didn’t see a problem,” Jin Guangyao folded his hands together, “We weren’t late, and he did succeed in catching the bird.”**

**Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes at their antics.**

**“Quite interesting,” Wei Wuxian agreed, “And with golden feathers.”**

**“Indeed,” Nie Huaisang grinned, “Let me tell you, it’s even more amusing. For example...” He trailed off as he caught Lan Wangji staring at him. He quickly looked forward, the other boy following his lead. Wei Wuxian slowly turned to meet Lan Wangji’s stare, smiling and waving at him, which forced him to look away.**

***“ The fuddy duddy is so mean. ”* He thought, then sent a devious grin towards Nie Huaisang.**

**This was what happened when the heirs to the four major Sects gathered?**

Everyone knew Nie Huaisang's reputation. He was a weakling and a coward. Compared to his brother, well, a comparison would just be cruel. They remembered that this whole viewing was organized by him, because Wei Wuxian was his friend.

If Nie Huaisang was really that close to him, as these memories and his actions suggested, then there must have been nothing intimidating about the Wei Wuxian of the past. They must have been two of a kind, both lazy and fun-seeking. If Wei Wuxian were arrogant, he would not have befriended Nie Huaisang. If he were cruel, Nie Huaisang would have avoided him.

Those who weren't invested now found themselves intrigued. What happened to him?

**The presentation of gifts came next. The Jin Sect went first with no difficulties. After that went the Nie Sect, which was almost ruined when Meng Yao started explaining their gift to Grandmaster Lan.**

**"Who is he?" Some disciples whispered, their voices carrying across the room.**

**"He is Meng Yao," Another answered.**

**"He is the love child of Jin-gongzi, right?" Meng Yao tensed at the gossip.**

**"It was said that he went to the Jin Clan for a proposal-" Wei Wuxian glanced back, "-only to be kicked out of Koi Tower. After that, he became a follower of the Nie Sect. As children of Jin-zongzhu, they are treated so differently. One is in heaven and one is in hell."**

Jin Guangyao's hands curled into fists, hidden beneath his table. There was no point to seeking vengeance against these disciples. They likely died in the war.

He ignored the way the past gossip ignited present gossip. He looked at the image of his past self, the one who had faithfully served Nie Mingjue. He tried not to think back to that time in his life. Was it hell, to serve someone he respected and who respected him? Not that he could go back to that after he lost Nie Mingjue's trust and respect.

Even now he was a war hero, he was acknowledged as his father's son, but he still didn't have the respect he deserved. Koi Tower was full of whispers. They cared more for gossip than reality. He knew everyone called him a bastard behind his back.

Perhaps that was a step up from being called it to his face in the Nie Sect?

He wished he didn't remember everything he saw. Then he could ignore the way Wei Wuxian's expression didn't change upon hearing who he was. Jin Zixuan looked embarrassed. Jiang Yanli glanced at him in pity. Jiang Wanyin just looked uncomfortable. But Wei Wuxian didn't seem to care at all.

Then again, he heard Lotus Pier was full of whispers about his birth as well. Maybe, after being called a bastard for long enough, the word didn't hold any meaning to him.

**Lan Qiren cleared his throat, "Quiet!"**

**Lan Xichen descended from the dais to accept the gift. He smiled, “I have heard that Nie-zongzhu has a helpful assistant. Hearing the elegance of your speech today, it is as my expectations.” Meng Yao looked up hesitantly, but averted his gaze quickly. Lan Xichen reached out to reveal the pot, brushing their hands together as he did so.**

**He complimented the pot and took it away. Meng Yao bowed, “Thank you, Zewu-Jun.”**

Nie Mingjue grimaced. Things used to be so different. If he hadn’t sent Meng Yao with Huaisang, then Xichen never would have met him. He wouldn’t have been drawn in by the meek, polite man who appeared to need protection.

Maybe his life wouldn’t be so complicated then.

**The memory cut away to show the Wens arriving at Cloud Recesses.**

**“Gongzi, please present your invitation,” One of the guards requested.**

**Wen Chao looked back at his retinue, then scoffed, “Invitation?”**

**“No invitation, no entry,” The guard recited, “No passing jade pendant, no entry. Coming late, no entry.”**

**Wen Chao stuck a hand out and set the man’s throat on fire. The other desperately tried to help him as Wen Chao laughed, “This is the invitation of the QishanWen.”**

**Wen Qing stepped forward to put the fire out, then turned to her distant cousin, “His Excellency has ordered me to investigate secretly. It’s not wise to get their attention. We better lay low.”**

**Wen Chao held up a finger and wagged it, then strode forward, “Wen Qing, Wen Qing, people from minor clans like you are always too cautious. I’m telling you, for the QishanWen, this is hardly a display.” Then he started marching up the steps.**

**No one missed how tightly Wen Qing held her sword.**

So she hated Wen Chao and feared Wen Ruohan.

Not so different from the rest of them.

Around the room, heads bent together. Wen Qing was the Head of the Yiling Supervisory Office, but none of them could remember her taking part of any battle. Why would she? She was famed for her abilities as a doctor and healer. Even so, her capture would have been celebrated as one of Wen Ruohan’s closer relatives.

If she was captured, it wasn’t on a battlefield.

So where was she during the war?



**The memory went back to the presentation of the Jiang Sect. Jiang Cheng didn't have a chance to finish his introduction before Wen Chao interrupted.**

**"So far," He drawled arrogantly, "I think that the gate of the Lan Sect is the hardest to enter." Jiang Cheng moved out of the way, everyone in the room exchanging worried glances.**

**"Not knowing Wen-gongzi would come, we, the Lan Sect, should apologize," Lan Xichen spoke as Wen Chao dismissively examined his sleeves, "In the recent century, the Wen Sect has never attended the lectures of the Lan. Is Wen-gongzi here to relay any advice from his Excellency?"**

**"Lan-zongzhu," Wen Chao replied, "You are wrong. I'm not here for the lecture. I'm just escorting someone here. Besides, the QishanWen is always educating others. Surely we don't need your lecture."**

**Lan Wangji took half a step forward at the insult, but Lan Xichen stopped him with a small shake of his head.**

**Nie Huaisang fluttered his fan, "He's so arrogant."**

**"In that case," Wei Wuxian asked, "Why did Wen-gongzi come here?"**

**Of course he spoke.**

**Jin Guangshan frowned at his audacity, even while others muttered approvingly. He kept looking for something the demonic cultivator feared, but it seemed like he refused to be intimidated. He spoke his mind freely when he confronted his son, when politeness could have gotten them a room for the night. He confronted Wen Chao, when saying nothing was far safer.**

**The only useful information he'd learned was that Wei Wuxian was fiercely protective of his siblings. So much so he was beginning to doubt his defection had any impact on what Jiang Wanyin and Jiang Yanli thought of him.**

**But he couldn't threaten the Jiang Sect Leader easily, and harming his daughter-in-law was unthinkable.**

**Wen Chao didn't look at him, "Who is this hangdog?"**

**"I don't deserve to be called a hangdog," Wei Wuxian replied, placing his hands on his hips, "I'm Wei Wuxian of the YunmengJiang."**

**At this, Wen Chao finally looked at him, his eyes going to his sword and his symbol, "So even a nobody dares to interrupt me."**

**Wei Wuxian's expression hardened, "My brother, Jiang Cheng, was saluting just now. How could you shout and yell like that? Is this what the QishanWen teach others?"**

**Wen Chao turned to fully face him, “Okay. Today, I will show you how our clan deals with those who don’t listen.” Wei Wuxian just nodded dismissively.**

**“Wen-gongzi,” Jiang Cheng cut in, “It’s just a small disagreement. Why are you so aggressive?”**

**“The YunmengJiang are unaware of etiquette,” Wen Chao declared, “If I don’t give a lesson, people will say we don’t stick to our principles.”**

**The Wen disciples sprang into action, drawing their weapons and flocking around the young master. Wei Wuxian kicked his sword into his hand and unsheathed it, pointing it at Wen Chao’s throat. He was quickly followed by Jiang Cheng and the other Jiang disciples. Jiang Yanli went behind her brother. Meng Yao went in front of Nie Huaisang.**

It didn’t go unnoticed by Nie Mingjue how his former deputy placed himself between his brother and danger. Was this part of his act? Or had he, at some point, genuinely cared about his family?

Others noted how it was only the Jiang who drew their weapons against the Wen. Of course the Sect that valued freedom would speak out against the Sect attempting to oppress the others.

Was this why they were destroyed? The rumors said it was Wei Wuxian’s fault. They said Wei Wuxian went too far, that he insulted Wen Chao one too many times. They said if it weren’t for him, Lotus Pier would still be standing and the former heads would still be alive. But seeing him take a stand, they felt conflicted.

War came anyways. The Wens would have attacked regardless of his insult.

Looking at it like this, he was standing up for what was right.

By blaming him, were they saying his actions were wrong?

**The resulting standoff ended when Lan Qiren nodded to Lan Xichen. The young Sect Leader closed his eyes as he sighed, then pulled out his xiao to play a song that disarmed all present.**

**“The Twin Jades of Lan really deserve their reputation,” Nie Huaisang commented.**

**Lan Xichen went down to their level, “Wen-gongzi, today is the Ceremony Day of Cloud Recesses. I hope you can restrain yourself.”**

**Before Wen Chao could reply, Wen Qing stepped forward, dropping into a salute, “I am Wen Qing of the QishanWen. I am under orders of His Excellency to attend the lecture. Me and my little brother, Wen Ning, are new in Cloud Recesses and are not familiar with the rules. We hope that Grandmaster Lan and Lan-zongzhu can forgive us.”**

**Wen Ning brought forward their gift. Lan Qiren rose, “If that’s true, I’ll accept it.”**

**Lan Xichen took the box, “Wen-gongzi, the Salute Ceremony is over. Please get some rest in our guest house. As for tomorrow’s lecture, please come here on time.”**

**Wen Chao scoffed and turned to leave.**

Once again, Wen Qing was showing herself to be cut from a different cloth entirely.

Doubt started to leak into their minds. Wei Wuxian showed he would stand up to any injustice before him. If he saw Wen Qing as innocent, then maybe she was.

It didn’t justify his actions at Qiongqi Pass. It didn’t make him any less dangerous or heretical. He might have thrown away his morality when he became a demonic cultivator, but the doubt still lingered.

**The memory skipped to Wei Wuxian walking down the corridors of Cloud Recesses. On his left was Jiang Cheng. On his right, Nie Huaisang, who smiled, “Hey, Wei-xiong, you are so great. You dared to face Wen Chao and there was no one else who did.”**

**Wei Wuxian’s arms stayed crossed, “Why should we be afraid of him? Resisting evil guys is an endless joy.”**

**“Wei-xiong, I want to have your courage,” Nie Huaisang complimented.**

**Jiang Cheng scoffed, “His courage is not really something normal people can compare to.”**

**Wei Wuxian laughed once, “Let me tell you...before increasing your courage, you should learn how to play.”**

**“Play?” Nie Huaisang echoed, “Play what?”**

Lan Xichen avoided his friend’s gaze. Perhaps he had given...less details about Huaisang’s behavior than were needed to complete the picture, but just as he hoped to see Wangji make friends, he was overjoyed with Huaisang’s friendship.

It was hard for people of their rank to make friends. Those within their Sects were their subordinates, naturally creating a gap. Those of equal rank in other Sects rarely formed genuine friendships, just the facsimile of friendship to ease business and politics. It was even harder for Huaisang, who had such a high position but was not highly skilled like the others.

**“I can teach you,” Wei Wuxian offered, “How about we play all around Cloud Recesses?” Nie Huaisang nodded, and came closer at the taller boy’s gesture. He whispered, “There’s a stream in the back hill. We can catch some fish together.”**

**“Wei-xiong, are you serious?” Nie Huaisang asked.**

**“Of course,” He drew back.**

**“Come on,” Jiang Cheng complained, “Don’t mislead him. Wei Wuxian, tomorrow is the official lecture. Do not forget. You still have 260 copies of the principles to transcribe.”**

**Wei Wuxian’s shoulders slumped, “Again.” He hit his brother in the chest with his sword, “Can you stop mentioning that?” Then he walked off with Nie Huaisang.**

“Is this really what you three were doing during the lectures?” Jin Zixuan asked.

“Nie-xiong and Wei Wuxian,” Jiang Wanyin crossed his arms, “I was focused.”

Huaisang rolled his eyes, “Don’t act so innocent, Jiang-xiong.”

“Oh?” He arched an eyebrow, “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Jin Zixuan tensed. He had contributed his memories of their classes because it was hard to reconcile that image of Wei Wuxian with who he was during the Sunshot Campaign. He didn’t get involved with their pranks, but he sat with Lan Wangji on one side while his wife sat with her brothers and Nie Huaisang. He wondered, if the seating were different, if they would have invited him.

He didn’t envy their friendship, exactly, but he knew his father would see it as a threat when he realized how genuine it was. Jiang Wanyin was now a Sect Leader. Given the Nie’s pattern of Qi deviations, there was a good chance Nie Huaisang would be the Nie Sect Leader within the decade. And everyone knew Lan Xichen kept his brother in close confidence.

Not that they were close yet in the memories but he wasn’t a complete idiot. There was a reason those two were alone on the mountain and he looked forward to not being the only one with an embarrassing romance on display.

He couldn’t be worse at romance than Lan Wangji. He refused.

Still, he wasn’t sure how to convince his father their friendship wasn’t a threat. Maybe he would be appeased by Jin Guangyao’s sworn brotherhoods, but neither of the Sect Leaders had as much sway over their brothers as their brothers had on them. Otherwise Nie Huaisang would be stronger, and Lan Wangji would at least attempt to be friendlier.

**The trio wandered by Lan Wangji, and Wei Wuxian perked up, “Ji-xiong!” He called out, making the other pause, “Ji-xiong! It’s me!”**

**Nie Huaisang bowed, but was ignored. All of them were ignored as Lan Wangji turned and walked off in a different direction.**

**“He didn’t hear me. I’m sure,” Wei Wuxian decided.**

**Nie Huaisang patted his arm, “Wei-xiong. You even dare to provoke the famous Lan Zhan, Lan-er-gongzi. As long as I am in the Lan Sect, I can only avoid him.”**

**“It’s not a big deal,” Wei Wuxian said, then looked mischievous, “Let me tell you, I even fought him last night.”**

**Huaisang was impressed, “You fought Lan Wangji?” Jiang Cheng just rolled his eyes as the other continued, “Wei-xiong, you really are reckless.”**

**They continued wandering as Wei Wuxian informed him of what happened the previous night. Jiang Cheng watched them continue, shaking his head and rolling his eyes again before reluctantly following them.**

“Still can’t believe that’s true,” Jiang Wanyin muttered.

“Does he often lie?” Lan Xichen asked.

“He’s good at keeping secrets,” The young Sect Leader scowled, “If he doesn’t want to talk about something, he just doesn’t talk about it.”

Lan Wangji internally grimaced. He suspected Wei Ying scattered the truth amongst them, giving them each a piece and trusting they wouldn’t come together to complete the puzzle. He wished he could just skip ahead, but he also found himself enjoying these memories. After all, he’d tried so hard to ignore him during this time.

**It switched to Wen Qing wandering the back hills. She looked around as though sensing something, then pulled a needle from her cuff. She sent it flying forward, unsurprised when it encountered an invisible barrier. She narrowed her eyes in further examination.**

“A barrier along the back hills?” Jin Guangshan asked.

“An ancient enchantment,” Lan Xichen answered unworriedly.

It wasn’t like outsiders could easily get past it.

**It switched back to Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang standing in a stream. Wei Wuxian stared intently at a fish, “Here I come…” He slowly placed his hands in the water to wrap around the fish, but before he could, Nie Huaisang interrupted with a shouted, “Wei-xiong!”**

**“You frightened the fish away!” Wei Wuxian scolded.**

**Nie Huaisang laughed, gesturing, “Okay, go on.” His second attempt was more successful, and the smaller boy got excited, “Hey! Give it to me. Throw it to me!”**

**Wei Wuxian threw it, but Nie Huaisang failed to catch it.**

People laughed. Wei Wuxian was funny on his own, but with someone to play along with rather than scold him he was twice as amusing.

**The taller boy put his hands on his hips, “Nie-xiong, it’s okay if you can’t help.” He rolled up his sleeves, “But I finally caught a fish for you, you shouldn’t let it escape.”**

**Nie Huaisang deflated, “I have to say, Wei-xiong, there are only mountains back home, no rivers. It’s different from your home in Yunmeng, where there are lakes and rivers everywhere. Besides, we have magic tricks. Why should we catch fish ourselves?”**

**Wei Wuxian’s hands went back to his hips, “Magic tricks for catching fish?” He asked, “That’s boring. I brought you along to play around Gusu. Aren’t climbing mountains and wading into rivers a part of that?”**

**Nie Huaisang mirrored him, “What you said...” He trailed off, then nodded, “Makes sense to me.” He rolled up his sleeve, “Then let’s continue.”**

This reminded him why he missed Wei Wuxian so much.

Nie Huaisang fanned his face. It didn’t bother him so much that people laughed at his inability. He just glanced pointedly at his brother to make sure he noted Wei Wuxian’s response. His friend got annoyed, but his annoyance didn’t last. He didn’t tell him to stand to the side or force him to get better.

Wei Wuxian enjoyed his company for things other than cultivation.

It was probably why he hesitated to judge him simply because he became a demonic cultivator.

**“Quiet,” Wei Wuxian ordered, but failed to catch a fish. His attention shifted to his friend, who had finally waded a little deeper into the water. He grinned mischievously and tapped the end of his nose, before raising his voice slightly, “There’s so many fish here, Nie-xiong.” He silently moved behind his friend, then kicked him into the water.**

**Nie Huaisang floundered, panicking, “Help! Help me, Wei-xiong!” His friend just laughed, and with one final, “Help,” He realized he could stand.**

**His expression twisted in anger, “Wei Wuxian, I-”**

**Before he could issue a threat, Wei Wuxian laughed and pointed, “Fish! Look behind you!” He did so, “You see, there’s a fish behind you! To the left. Beside you.”**

**Anger forgotten, Nie Huaisang shushed him, and moved to try and catch it.**

Nie Mingjue felt a stab of envy. This was the sort of relationship he wanted with his brother. Huaisang could be a little shit, but they didn’t tease each other like this. His little brother was too wary of his temper, and he was too tough for the light ribbing. Huaisang liked to chatter, while he considered himself a man of action.

He couldn’t convince Huaisang to do anything physical. Not training, not night hunts, not even strenuous walks. Yet here, Wei Wuxian got him to get his robes wet and try to catch fish with his hands.

He would convince Huaisang to join a quest for the Yin Iron, the most dangerous artifact in existence.

**Wei Wuxian's smile fell as he sensed something. He quickly departed from the water, leaving Nie Huaisang all alone. He wandered up a nearby path until he was along the back hills. There, he spotted Wen Qing with her needles, still examining the barrier.**

**"Wen-guniang!" He called to her, then smiled and approached, "Wen-guniang. Why are you here?" She didn't look directly at him, so he tried again, "Hey, your silver needle looks pretty cool." He moved as though to grab it.**

**She pulled back, "Don't touch it." She looked away, "Did anybody ever tell you never touch the silver needle of a doctor?"**

**He let out an almost nervous laugh, "I've only heard that just now. So there is a female doctor in the Wen Sect who is cruel and merciless and people can't approach her." His words made her look at him, then she walked away.**

**He called after her, "Wen-guniang," She paused, allowing him to catch up, "You haven't answered me yet. Why are you here?" She didn't respond, "The back hill of Cloud Recesses can't be visited randomly. You can't be taking a walk for no reason, right?"**

**"Then what's your business here?" She demanded.**

**"Me?" He asked, crossing his arms, "My business is pretty serious." She looked at him again curiously, and he hid a smile while spreading his hands, "I'm catching fish."**

**Unimpressed, she walked away again.**

**So that was their first meeting?**

**Jiang Yanli didn't notice anything auspicious about it. If anything, there was no reason for her little brother to like her so much. It was easy to see the suspicion in his eyes as he asked her why she was so far from the others. There was also defensiveness in her eyes as she avoided his questions and tried to ignore him.**

**Though maybe he was drawn to people who ignored him?**

**No, that couldn't be true. Otherwise he wouldn't hang off Nie Huaisang and would try harder with Jin Zixuan.**

**It was dark by the next memory, and Jiang Cheng practiced with his sword while his sister brought out soup. She watched him patiently as he pushed himself, before interjecting, "A-Cheng, don't exhaust yourself. Tomorrow is the official lecture."**

**He didn't look at her when he responded, "These days, in Gusu, Wei Wuxian is always making others worried."**

**"We won't be this idle later on," She smiled, "Let him go."**

**"When will he think of the YunmengJiang?" He demanded.**

Never, but he seemed to already be prone to standing alone.

He didn't think his actions had any impact on the YunmengJiang. It was strange for a head disciple to not understand the impact of his actions, but he didn't.

**“A-Cheng,” Jiang Yanli replied softly, “Our ancestors were rangers who advocated frank actions and unrestrained minds. That’s exactly A-Xian’s personality.” He paused in his drills, “You don’t need to worry so much.”**

**He stopped and approached her table, his expression sad, “This is why Father always favors him.”**

**She rose, “A-Cheng, any disciple of the Jiang who has moral integrity will be favored by Father, right? Besides, you two are the same. You keep nagging him, “She grinned teasingly, then patted his shoulder, “But you are just concerned about him.”**

**“I’m not,” He looked away.**

“Wei-xiong doesn't think Jiang Fengmian favored him,” Nie Huaisang commented.

“What?” Jiang Cheng snapped. He was uncomfortable with sharing this, but his sister said they needed to be open about everything, even their insecurities. There was no room for misunderstandings, but he hoped to get through this without comment.

“I asked Wei-xiong about it. I thought...” The smaller man trailed off, “It doesn't matter what I thought. He thinks Jiang Fengmian pitied him because his parents died.”

“That wasn't true,” Jiang Cheng tensed.

“It's what he thinks,” Nie Huaisang fiddled with his fan.

**“Hey,” Wei Wuxian called out, returning with two roasted fish, “Both of you are here.”**

**“Again, you...” Jiang Cheng trailed off.**

**Wei Wuxian glanced back, “Keep it down.”**

**Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, “See, A-jie?”**

**“I...” Wei Wuxian stopped in his response as he smelled food, “Wow, Shijie, freshly roasted fish and vegetable soup is the perfect match.” They took their seats around the table. He ate his fish while Jiang Yanli served soup. Then he held the other out, “Here.” When it was refused, he continued, “You’re not eating, are you? Then I’ll eat them all.”**

**He took a bite out of the other and was still ignored, “Ay. Come one. Hey, you’re stubborn. Last chance.” He held it out again, “If you don’t eat, there will be no more fish.”**

**Jiang Cheng swatted at it, “Who did you call stubborn?”**



**“Those who won’t compromise are stubborn,” Wei Wuxian replied.**

**“You!”**

**“Alright, you two,” Jiang Yanli interrupted. She took one of the fish and then handed it to Jiang Cheng, who then accepted it, “A-Cheng.” She smiled, “A-Xian. After the official lecture tomorrow, you have to stop messing around.”**

**He held up his hand, “I promise. Just like Yu-furen said, I won’t make any trouble.”**

There were a few snorts from his classmates.

Wei Wuxian not make trouble? He was trouble incarnate. But nothing he’d done so far was sinister. His trouble was just minor rule-breaking and fooling around.

**The memory skipped to the lecture, with Lan Qiren reading the rules. The front row was dutifully paying attention, but Wei Wuxian was asleep behind his brother. Jiang Cheng noticed, and reached a hand back to hit his desk. Nie Huaisang drifted off next to him as the recitation continued, but Wei Wuxian threw something at him.**

**In response, Nie Huaisang threw a small pouch of nuts, hiding his amusement behind his fan. Lan Qiren began to move around the room. When his back was to Wei Wuxian, the boy stuck one of his drawings to it. The hastily drawn turtle caused many of the Nie and Jiang disciples to start snickering.**

**Lan Wangji removed it with a furious glare towards the perpetrator, who just smiled in response. As the glare continued, the smile faded, until both looked away.**

**“Huaisang!”**

**“Da-ge!” The younger brother complained, “I already knew the rules!”**

**“So you broke them intentionally?”**

**“I’m not technically the one breaking the rules,” Nie Huaisang argued.**

**“No sleeping outside designated hours,” Lan Wangji recited.**

**“I wasn’t fully asleep,” The smaller man pouted.**

**“I’m sure there’s a rule against enabling others to break the rules,” Nie Mingjue narrowed his eyes.**

Lan Xichen frowned. He wasn’t there for every class, but if he remembered right it was only Wei Wuxian who was punished until they were all caught drinking. Uncle only complained about Wei Wuxian’s disrespect and corrupting influence on his peers. He thought Huaisang was too scared to try anything, but that was apparently not true.

One didn’t deserve to be punished while the other wasn’t.

**Time skipped a little to Wei Wuxian, bored once again, pulling a paperman talisman out from his robes. He animated it with a little of his spiritual energy, and it floated over to Lan Wangji.**

**Lan Qiren, of course, noticed, “Wei Ying!”**

**He stood, “Here!” But turned to watch the paperman crawl up Lan Wangji’s shoulder. The Jiang siblings looked horrified and disappointed, but Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang laughed. Lan Wangji glared at him as he crushed the paperman.**

**Lan Qiren set down the rules, “Now that you don’t need my lecture, let me ask you. Are imps, demons, ghosts, and monsters the same thing?”**

**“No,” Wei Wuxian answered.**

**“Why not? How are they differentiated?”**

**“Imps are formed from living, non-human beings. Demons are formed from living humans. Ghosts are formed from dead humans. Monsters are formed from dead, non-human beings.” He smiled at his sister, who glanced back proudly.**

Such a quick answer to something even experienced cultivators got wrong.

Though some frowned at the way Wei Wuxian was being called out. Yes, he wasn’t paying complete attention, but neither was Nie Huaisang or some of the other disciples. Nor was it as important for Wei Wuxian to memorize the rules of another Sect. He was the head disciple then, not the Sect Heir.

Knowing the Lan Sect rules would never be useful to him, as he would not be hosting Lan disciples or visiting Cloud Recesses on any sort of regular basis like the Sect heirs in the class.

He was there to learn about cultivation. He was a member of the YunmengJiang, who preached freedom over restraint, morality over righteousness. He didn't need the strictness of the Lan Sect.

**“Imps and monsters are often confused,” Lan Qiren stroked his beard, “Give me an example.”**

**Wei Wuxian pondered the demand for a moment, “That’s easy.” He pointed, “For example, if that tree behind you is tainted by a certain energy and is cultivated into a conscious being that causes trouble, it would be an imp. If I take an axe and cut it in the middle so only a dead stump is left, and then it cultivates into a being, it would be a monster.”**

**“What was the profession of the ancestors of the Nie Clan?”**

**“They were butchers.”**

**“The symbol of the Jin Sect is a white peony. What type of white peony is it?”**

**“Sparks Amidst Snow.” He shared another smile with his sister.**

**“Who was the first in the cultivation world to focus on the rise of his clan rather than his sect?”**

**“The ancestry of the Wen Clan, Wen Mao.”**

**He glanced at Nie Huaisang, who nodded encouragingly. Around the room, other disciples looked impressed at his rapid response to the questions.**

It was impressive.

It still struck some as unfair how he was being interrogated. Was Lan Qiren deliberately trying to embarrass Wei Wuxian? Was he being targeted because he wasn't a Sect Heir, and thus was more vulnerable to mistreatment? It wasn't like he was alone in his misbehavior.

“Does Grandmaster Lan question his students like this often?” Jin Guangyao asked.

“No,” Nie Huaisang shook his head, “It was just Wei-xiong.”

“Uncle was apprehensive about Wei Wuxian because of his reputation,” Lan Xichen tried to explain.

“So he listened to gossip rather than make his own opinion?” Jin Guangyao frowned slightly.

He didn't like to cause his sworn brother distress, but it was also his job to point out the flaws in others. Hopefully that would minimize the damage if the worst was revealed of the Jin Sect. There were many evils, large and small, hidden behind the veneer of righteousness.

If people thought Hanguang-Jun was unreasonable in his rigidity, they had never met Lan Qiren.

“Wei Wuxian's first impression was not the best,” Xichen sat up straighter, defensive.

“It would be hard to make a good first impression when one's siblings are missing,” Sect Leader Yao followed his lead.

It wasn't quite a defense of Wei Wuxian, but the minor Sects were always eager to praise and criticize the major Sects, depending on where they felt the currents were flowing.

**“As a disciple of the Jiang Sect, you would be familiar with all these and know them by heart.” His happiness fell at the scathing tone, “Answering them correctly is nothing to be proud of. Let me ask you again.”**

**“There was an executioner with parents, a wife, and children, but he executed more than a hundred people. Then he died in public, and his body was left alone for a week. With the repressed energy of resentment, he started to haunt and kill.” Lan Qiren said, “What should be done?”**

**This gave Wei Wuxian, and several disciples around the room, pause.**

Nie Huaisang started flipping pages, and Lan Qiren raised his voice, “Don’t open your books! Think about this on your own!” Looking proud of himself for knocking the disciples down a peg, he addressed his nephew, “Wangji, tell him what should be done.”

Lan Wangji rose and recited, “There are three ways. First, liberate. Second, suppress. Third, eliminate. First, try to move him to his family and grant his dying wish, setting him free from his own obsessiveness. If it fails, suppress it. If he is guilty, and his hatred does not decrease, exterminate him completely. The cultivation world should stick to this order of measures. No errors should be allowed.”

“Not even a word wrong,” Lan Qiren praised, rising, “No matter the kind of person or cultivation, one needs to be as solid as him. If one becomes complacent and proud just because they defeated a few mountain beings in their home and hold some lofty reputation, they would definitely bring dishonor upon themselves.”

“And now he insults him,” Nie Mingjue commented.

“Was he not right?” Jin Zixun asked, “He did dishonor himself.”

“That has yet to be decided,” Jin Zixuan narrowed his eyes, “Especially back then, or does Grandmaster Lan claim to be prescient?”

“He does not,” Lan Xichen held back a sigh with great effort, “It was unfair.”

Madame Jin stared consideringly at the future demonic cultivator. This boy had endured far more unjust treatment at Lotus Pier. Perhaps that was why he didn’t look so insulted at being singled out and admonished before his peers. If her sworn sister couldn’t break his spirit, then Lan Qiren never stood a chance.

But if her son was singled out and insulted, then he wouldn’t have stayed in the lectures.

It was a pity Wei Wuxian didn’t have parents to be outraged on his behalf. Perhaps Nie Huaisang was right and Ziyuan had mistaken her husband’s treatment of the boy. It was easy to mistake pity for compassion, attention for favoritism. Especially when Ziyuan was concerned for her own children.

He turned away, but Wei Wuxian was not so easily disheartened, “Grandmaster,” He stuck his hand up, “I have a question.”

“Speak.”

“Although liberation comes first, it is often impossible. To grant his dying wish sounds simple. It would be easy if the wish was for a new piece of clothing,” He paused, “But what if the wish was to kill lots of people in revenge?”

Before Lan Qiren could respond, Lan Wangji spoke, “Thus, suppression is after liberation. If necessary, elimination would also follow.”

**“It’s such a waste,” Wei Wuxian said, “I actually knew the answer, but I was thinking of a fourth way.”**

People exchanged looks. A fourth way?

**Lan Qiren harrumphed, “I have never heard of a fourth way. What’s your solution?”**

**Disciples turned to look at their classmate, who started, “Since the executioner died abruptly, it’s only natural that he turned into a ghost. Since he executed more than a hundred people before he died, why not dig up the graves of those people, arouse their resentment, collect their heads, and use them to fight the ghost?”**

“See!” Sect Leader Ouyang declared, “He was already thinking of demonic cultivation!”

“Of course he was,” Jiang Cheng quickly replied, “Do you think he forgot the puppet so quickly?”

“But to ask Grandmaster Lan about it...” Sect Leader Yao stroked his beard, “How foolish.”

“Is it foolish to ask one’s teacher about a matter you do not understand?” Nie Huaisang wondered, “It’s not like he was going to lose face with Teacher Lan. Not with the way he was being treated already.”

**Lan Qiren immediately angered, “How dare you! The essence of exorcising demons and annihilating ghosts is to liberate them! You do not study the methods of liberation to increase their resentment! You reversed the order and ignored ethics and morality!”**

**“Grandmaster, there are some things that are not suitable for liberation,” Wei Wuxian argued, much to the horror of the others in the room, “So why not find a way to make use of them? When Yu the Great tamed the flood, obstruction was the inferior method and redirection was superior. Suppression is the same as obstruction, so isn’t it inferior-”**

**He was cut off as Lan Qiren retrieved a scroll from his desk and threw it at his head. Wei Wuxian dodged, “Grandmaster, spiritual energy is energy. Resentful energy is also energy. Spiritual energy is in our dantian. It can split mountains and fill oceans for human use. So why can’t resentful energy also be used by humans?”**

Those were some interesting points. There were places with demonic beings incapable of being controlled by the traditional methods. The Burial Mounds were one such example.

Before Wei Wuxian made a home there, many thought it was uninhabitable. No, they thought it was a death sentence. Anyone who entered such a cursed place was doomed. Their body would be torn apart and their soul consumed.

Nie Mingjue thought of his ancestral tomb. His Sect could think of nothing better than locking the sabers with resentful spirits to fight. He wondered what Wei Wuxian’s solution to such a problem would be. Could he ease their burden? Did he have a method of avoiding Qi deviation?

**Jiang Yanli tried to meet his gaze desperately, while Nie Huaisang tried to shush him. Jiang Cheng whispered, “Wei Wuxian,” warningly, but none drew his attention.**

**Lan Qiren replied, “Then let me ask you again! How can you make sure that the resentful energy will only listen to you and not harm others?”**

**“I haven’t thought of it yet!” Wei Wuxian said, then dodged another thrown scroll.**

Lan Xichen was horrified at the sight of his uncle’s temper. He didn’t want to think of the number of rules he broke in just these last minutes.

Yes, Wei Wuxian’s question was impudent, but it was just a question. He wanted to understand the use and purpose of a puppet, and the only way to understand how one would be created was to ask about the use of resentful energy. As the puppets were a secret, Wei Wuxian couldn’t say that, and in his rage, his uncle didn’t consider the connection.

And if he was genuinely curious about demonic cultivation so long ago...why wouldn’t he ask an infuriating question to a man who would be infuriated by him no matter what?

**“If you thought of it, the cultivation world would not allow your existence!” Lan Qiren thundered as all the students looked on in horror. He abruptly looked away, “Get out! Go to the Library Pavilion and copy the chapter of conduct a thousand times!”**

“So he was warned,” Sect Leader Yao spread his arms.

“Does that make it better or worse?” Sect Leader Ouyang wondered.

“It makes it interesting,” Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes, “He knew Teacher Lan didn’t like him, so he didn’t bother trying to act in a manner he liked. If he thought everyone would hate him...”

Why try to change their minds?

His siblings exchanged looks. If everyone was going to hate him regardless of what he did, why not push everyone away? Why bother explaining where he got the Stygian Tiger Amulet or where he learned to use Chenqing? Why try to find people to support him, to help him, if he would simply be judged for his cultivation style?

“Why would he turn to demonic cultivation at all?” Jin Zixuan wondered.

**Wei Wuxian saluted, ignoring his sister’s whispered, “XianXian.” As he retrieved his sword. He glanced at Lan Wangji for a moment, then turned and left. The disciples exchanged looks around the room, then Lan Qiren continued, “Wangji, take him to the library. He can’t leave without making a thousand copies.”**

**Lan Wangji saluted, “Yes.”**

It was unclear whether or not he deserved that punishment. He disrespected an esteemed elder, but the elder obviously held some unfair bias against him. It was doubly terrible considering the Lan Sect’s principles against gossiping and making unfounded judgments.

**But Wei Wuxian didn't go to the library. Instead, he made his way to the back hills again. This time, instead of finding Wen Qing, he found Wen Ning practicing his archery. He watched him successfully hit a rock falling down the waterfall, then called out, "Wen-gongzi! You're good at archery!"**

**The nervous boy knocked over his quiver in surprise, and Wei Wuxian darted forward to help him, "I'm sorry I startled you. Wen-xiong, you're skilled at archery," He repeated, much calmer this time, "Why didn't I see you at the Qingtan Fair?"**

**"You flatter me," Wen Ning replied, "I'm not so good at it and I shall ask you for more advice."**

**"Ay," Wei Wuxian tapped his arm, "You're too humble. I think you're gifted. Ordinary people can't compare to you. Let's learn from each other's strong points and close the gap." Wen Ning smiled nervously, "By the way, Wen-xiong, why are you here alone in this lonely place? Why don't you attend the lecture?"**

**"I'm still young," Wen Ning answered, "I'm not qualified to attend classes. Wei-gongzi, why are you here?"**

**"This is the Ghost General?"**

**Lan Wangji held back a snort. They heard the name Wen and assumed Wen Ning was dangerous. He was just as much of a weakling and a coward as Nie Huaisang, but where Nie Mingjue was enough to protect his brother, Wen Qing never stood a chance.**

**He watched Wei Ying, knowing he won the timid boy over with his kindness.**

**It was that simple. Wei Ying was kind to him, so Wen Ning gave him his loyalty.**

**Wen Ning wasn't brought back from death to be a powerful weapon. He was brought back because Wei Ying failed him, and bringing him back was the only recourse he felt he had.**

**Wei Wuxian flipped his hair, "Well." He turned away, "To tell the truth, I just got kicked out by Grandmaster Lan." He laughed nervously.**

**"What?" Wen Ning asked.**

**Wei Wuxian shook his head and turned back, "It's a long story. Forget about it. I just saw you shoot an arrow." And he launched into an archery lesson, offering to adjust his posture for him as he practiced. He was a calm and serious teacher, surprisingly.**

**Then a voice called out, "Wen Ning!"**

**And he released the arrow towards his sister.**

**Wei Wuxian reacted immediately and jumped to hit the arrow with a talisman, successfully diverting it from its path.**

Jiang Cheng relaxed. Of course Wei Wuxian could easily divert arrows. He wondered if this was the beginning of the debt he owed the Wen siblings. He saved Wen Qing's life, but he also accidentally put it in danger. He decided that counted for nothing, but watched them interact.

What was it about those two that put them above his own siblings? He understood Wen Qing. She was amazing, but Wen Ning? Why was he so worthy of Wei Wuxian's protection? Why was he worth more than the lives of those at Qiongqi Pass? Why was he worth exile in the Burial Mounds?

**“Jie!” Wen Ning shouted.**

**“Why are you with him?” Wen Qing demanded.**

**“This is Wei-gongzi,” The younger brother beamed, “He’s a nice person. He’s instructing me.”**

**Wei Wuxian crossed his arms and stepped closer, “Wen-guniang, I haven’t asked you yet. Why do I always see you in the back hills?” He stepped on one of the rocks in the water, “Are you following me secretly?” He pointed up, “Are you looking for something in the back hill of the Lan Sect?”**

**“Wei Wuxian!” She interrupted, “Stop talking nonsense.”**

**The Wens then left, leaving Wei Wuxian to ponder her response alone. He moved to where Wen Qing had been standing, examining the waterfall, “*Is there really a secret in the back hill of Cloud Recesses?*”**

It didn't make any sense!

Jiang Cheng scowled. If Wei Wuxian suspected they had ulterior motives, he should have stayed away. He should have informed Zewu-Jun. He shouldn't have decided to investigate on his own. Why did he have to take on other people's troubles? Why couldn't he just mind his own business?

**Before he could get too close, he sensed someone behind him and drew his sword. He found it was only Lan Wangji, who blocked his first attack and then drew his own blade to cross against the other's.**

**Wei Wuxian smiled, “Ji-xiong, it's you.” He fixed his sleeve, “Ji-xiong, I didn't do it on purpose. It's your fault too. You came here silently. I wasn't even prepared.” There was no response, only the sound of the waterfall. Wei Wuxian stepped closer, “Ji-xiong, let me tell you a secret. I just heard a noise from the back hill. I guess someone sneaked into the back hill. Is it related to the spirit snatching?”**

**Lan Wangji grabbed his wrist and dragged him away, ignoring his protests.**

**“Was it related?” Jin Zixuan asked.**



“It would be safe to assume most of Wei Wuxian’s theories were correct,” Lan Xichen took a sip of tea.

“Not that Hanguang-Jun knew,” Nie Mingjue muttered.

Lan Xichen wondered if he should inform his uncle of the veracity of this projection. Soon would be the first punishment, then the Waterborne Abyss, their celebration, and then the second punishment. It wasn’t much longer until they would meet Lan Yi and the real problems with the Yin Iron would begin. His uncle was somewhere in the Tower, waiting for the formal ceremonies.

He would want to see what their ancestor said to Wangji, even if Wei Wuxian was involved.

He turned to one of his disciples, “Please get Shufu.”

Maybe less people would shoot looks at him with the actual man there.

## Chapter End Notes

Certain scenes will be skipped if they aren't from one of the POV's, or if I did not feel like including them because I don't think they contribute to the plot of this fic or were worth commenting on.

That being said, I have a lot of the transcription already done and post this story when I've finished writing the fic around it. That means that nothing is final, and I'm always open to ideas from readers, even if it means editing an already posted chapter!

Thanks for giving this a chance!

# Attempt The Impossible

## Chapter Notes

The Impossible being a romance without ridiculous obstacles and misunderstandings.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lan Qiren settled next to his nephews. He didn't understand why Wei Wuxian deserved such fuss. He was a demonic cultivator. If he wasn't guilty of the deaths at Qionqiong Pass, then he was guilty of something. There were no exceptions throughout history. If one fell from the righteous path, they brought death and chaos with them.

This was a lesson to the cultivation world.

**The memory jumped to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji in the library. The former was begrudgingly making copies, every once in a while shooting a glance at the other, who was writing. He set aside another finished copy, stretched, then rested his head on one hand to stare at his supervisor. Seeming to come to a decision, he got up and approached the other desk.**

**"What beautiful calligraphy," He complimented, "It's beyond the best." When he didn't get a response he leaned closer, "Wangji-xiong," He tried, then, "Lan Wangji." When that failed his smile fell and he said, "Lan Zhan."**

**This got his attention. Wei Wuxian withdrew at the glare, "Can you stop looking at me that way? It was you who ignored me first. That's why I called you by your informal name." He then leaned in again, "If you're upset, you can call me the same way."**

"It's that easy?" Nie Huaisang pouted.

Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes at him.

"No one calls you by your birth name," His classmate waved his fan, "For that matter, no one calls Wei Wuxian by his birth name either."

"He insisted on being called Wuxian," Jiang Yanli smiled softly, "It was the name Father gave him. Before you, Hanguang-Jun, I don't think anyone used his birth name."

Before Wei Ying, no one called him Lan Zhan.

Lan Wangji wasn't sure what to do with that thought. He allowed Wei Ying to call him Lan Zhan because Wei Ying was different. He felt a connection the moment he saw him, and it strengthened with every interaction, good and bad. Wei Ying was special to him, so he gave him privileges unlike any other.

He glanced at his uncle. He knew his brother was aware of the depths of his feelings, and his uncle suspected, but they didn't know everything. They especially didn't know what he did in the Cold Pond Cave.

**"Put down your leg," Lan Wangji responded.**

**"As you wish," He grinned, bringing his other leg up so he could sit next to him. He put an elbow on the desk, "By the way, Wangji-xiong, I want to ask you a question. Why do you hate me so much?" Once again, he was ignored, "Lan-er-gongzi, how can you ignore me again after a few words? I apologize and admit my fault."**

**"Yes, that night I should not have climbed the wall, drank alcohol, and fought with you, but I swear, I really knew nothing of your sect rules. Otherwise, I wouldn't have drank the Emperor's Smile in front of you," He almost sounded genuine in his apology, but his thoughts betrayed him, "*I would take it back and drink it secretly in my room.*"**

**"And I have to clear things up. It was you who fought me first," He continued, "If you didn't hit me, we could have just talked. As for me, if someone hits me first, I will absolutely hit him back. So I'm not the only one to blame." He paused, "Are you listening, Lan-er-gongzi?"**

"He doesn't know how to take a hint," Jin Zixuan snorted.

His wife smiled slightly, "Where would we be if I gave up?"

He flushed, Jiang Wanyin snorted, "Attempt the impossible."

Jin Zixuan glared at him, "Where's your impossible romance?"

His brother-in-law was the least romantic person he knew, and that was saying something given his own hopelessness. If he wasn't thrown out of a matchmaker's place once in his life he'd eat his robes. He wasn't sure what type of person would even catch Jiang Wanyin's interest. He was temperamental on a good day, and downright impossible on bad ones.

To his surprise, Jiang Wanyin blushed. It was always obvious when he was embarrassed, and he turned away with a huff.

His wife blinked, "A-Cheng?"

He didn't look back.

**Again, no response, so he leaned further into his line of vision, "May I have the honor of getting a glimpse from you?"**

**"Transcribe the text one more time," Lan Wangji ordered.**

**"Come on," Wei Wuxian sighed, "I have apologized."**

**"Not in a sincere way," Lan Wangji replied.**

**“I’m absolutely sincere,” Wei Wuxian complained, starting to grind more ink, “I’m sorry. I’ll apologize continuously to your heart’s content. I can even kneel down before you.” He laughed at his own teasing, causing Lan Wangji to glare at him again.**

**He kept laughing, but when he tried to speak again found himself silenced.**

**He then started to protest the additional punishment.**

A few people choked at the innuendo. He couldn’t possibly mean it that way, could he?

There was something about this interaction that seemed more than attention-seeking behavior. It bordered on flirtation. Of course, Hanguang-Jun refuted him at every effort, but if he continued to associate with him afterwards...did he grow used to it?

Did he return it?

“Are they cutsleeves?” Some whispered.

“I guess we’ll see.”

**It cut to Wen Qing walking into her room. Her brother immediately rose, “Jie! Where are you going?” She sat down at the table, her eyes distant and worried. Wen Ning hovered, “JieJie, since you came to Gusu, I haven’t seen you often. You...Are you really looking for something?”**

**She remembered Wen Ruohan’s words, and turned to look at her brother, who sat down next to her and began to pour tea, “JieJie, I won’t ask. Don’t get too tired.”**

**She accepted the cup, but set it down, “A-Ning, since you came to Cloud Recesses, have you felt anything strange?”**

**He thought about it, then shook his head, “No, JieJie, I have all the medicine you gave me.”**

**She patted his head, “Our family has been doctors for centuries, but I can’t cure my own brother.” She looked away, her eyes narrowing a little in anger, “If it were not for-”**

**“A-Jie,” Wen Ning interrupted, “Stop it.”**

**She took his hand in both of hers, “A-Ning, I will take you away from Nightless City sooner or later.” She squeezed, and he nodded.**

“Were they mistreated?” Lan Xichen frowned.

“Yes,” Jiang Cheng answered.

Jiang Yanli hid a gasp behind her hand. She hadn’t noticed anything between her little brother and Wen Qing, but she had only seen them together once before the war started. Perhaps they met up when she wasn’t around. After all, both of them gravitated around A-Xian. It was easy to collide in the same orbit, and she really was amazing.

“You sound certain,” Nie Mingjue placed a hand on his table, “Was she not raised by Wen Ruohan?”

“Just because someone raises you doesn’t mean they treat you well,” Her brother growled, “Wen Ruohan’s children were no more than pawns to him. Why would distant cousins be treated better?”

“Wen Qing is a gifted healer,” Jin Guangshan pointed out, “More valuable, perhaps, than cultivators as average as Wen Xu and Wen Chao.”

“What use is a healer to an army of corpses?” A-Cheng’s hand curled into a fist.

“Where was this defense earlier?” Her father-in-law stared at her little brother curiously.

“I had no evidence to prove it,” Zidian sparked dangerously.

Now he did, and she wondered if his feelings were more than gratitude for Wen Qing sheltering them after their home was destroyed.

**When it went back to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, they were both at their own desks. Wei Wuxian was working on a painting while Lan Wangji read. He smiled to himself as he added more details, glancing up occasionally to check them against the Lan Wangji in front of him. Then he held it up for a comparison.**

**Satisfied, he approached and handed it out, “Here.”**

**Lan Wangji didn’t even glance, “Have you transcribed all the books?”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, “Yes. It’s done. By the way, I won’t come starting tomorrow. This...” He set it down on the desk, “Is your gift.” When he still didn’t look he continued, “Right. I forgot to add something.” He borrowed his brush and added to the portrait, smirked, then declared, “Done!”**

**Lan Wangji set down his book to pick up the portrait of himself. His eyes widened when he noticed the flower added to his hair.**

“He’s quite skilled in painting,” Nie Mingjue noted.

“Of course he is,” His little brother rolled his eyes, “What do you think we did together?”

He didn’t expect something so...mundane. Talismans were expected. His swordsmanship was again expected. His jokes and almost annoying personality were unexpected, but not entirely. He’d heard rumors about his friendliness, but painting? It was one of the four gentlemanly arts, but most cultivators never spent time honing such a skill.

Huaisang loved to paint. He avoided saber training specifically to paint fans.

The more he watched, the more he saw how such a person became his brother’s friend.

He opened his mouth, but Huaisang hit him with his fan, “Sh. I want to see this.”

**“Boring,” Wei Wuxian commented, “I know you will say boring. Can you use a different word or add some new ones?”**

**Lan Wangji set it down gently, “Extremely boring.”**

**“You did add something,” The other stretched an arm out, grinning, “Thank you so much.”**

**The other picked up his book again, but found it replaced by pornography. He threw it to the side and stood while the other laughed, “Wei Ying.”**

Again, people were stuck between horror and humor.

It was an excellent prank, and it took Wei Wuxian a lot of effort to pull it off. Not many could draw such an enchanting portrait, or had deft enough hands to quickly swap the books. None of them could manage such with Hanguang-Jun, nor would any of them dare.

Eyes darted to Lan Qiren, who was quickly turning red with rage.

Others noted the use of the informal name. Yes, Wei Wuxian gave him permission, but he didn’t have to use it.

**“Are you sure they’re not cutsleeves?”**

**“Here!” He raised a hand jokingly.**

**Lan Wangji grabbed his sword, and the other’s laughter cut off, “Lan Zhan! Behave yourself.” The other trembled in rage, “I brought my sword too. Don’t you like your library?”**

**“How shameless,” Lan Wangji muttered.**

**“Why are you ashamed of this?” Wei Wuxian pouted, “Don’t tell me you’ve never read a book like this. I don’t believe it.”**

**Lan Wangji continued glaring, “Go outside. Let’s have a duel.”**

**“How can you be friends?” Su She wondered.**

He tried to make the question sound condescending, but he was genuinely curious. Hanguang-Jun was the picture of arrogance. He held himself above everyone around him, and never thought twice about how he only could do so with the advantages granted to him by his birth. He wouldn’t be Hanguang-Jun if he hadn’t been born to the main Lan family.

Yet Wei Wuxian wasn’t born into such luxury. He was the son of a servant and a rogue cultivator. He was treated poorly by the other narcissistic assholes who made up the elite.

He was like himself, and Jin Guangyao. He was just lucky to have been found by the Jiang Sect that didn’t care if he was irreverent.

**Wei Wuxian held up a hand, “No. Fighting is prohibited, don’t you know?” He looked away for a moment, but when he looked back Lan Wangji had moved to pick up the offending book and began destroying it, “Lan Zhan! No!”**

**He threw the scattered remains of the book into the air, and the other looked sad, “Lan Zhan! Lan Zhan. What a waste! You-”**

**“Piss off,” Lan Wangji stated.**

There were murmurs of shock at his statement, scattered amongst the laughter at the physical destruction of the porn.

Yes, Wei Wuxian was infuriating, but they never expected such language or aggression from the unflappable Second Jade.

Lan Xichen turned away from his brother to hide his amusement, sharing a smile with Nie Mingjue. Everyone needed to be messed with from time to time. It was certainly a goal of his fellow Sect Leader whenever he visited Cloud Recesses to get a reaction from Wangji. He was never successful.

Then again, who would trick Wangji into looking at porn other than Wei Wuxian? Who could possibly get close enough to him to pull this off?

**Wei Wuxian was no longer sad. He placed his hands on his hips, “Lan Zhan, people say you’re a noble gentleman, like you’re the rarest pearl, and no one can be more courteous than you. But you are just so-so. Cloud Recesses prohibits making noise, but you dare to tell me to piss off.”**

**Lan Wangji’s only response was to begin unsheathing his blade.**

**Wei Wuxian sighed, “Okay, I’ll piss off. I’m good at this anyway.” He stepped over the divider, “You don’t need to walk me out.”**

People laughed at the way he just wandered out as though he hadn’t been threatened with bodily harm for his prank.

“How shameless.”

Madame Jin tilted her head. The more she saw of Wei Wuxian, the more she feared his return to Lotus Pier. He was shameless, attention-seeking, and unruly, but he was also well-humored and light hearted. There didn’t seem to be a malicious bone in him. And it was starting to look like everyone favored Wei Wuxian over Jiang Cheng.

If Jiang Fengmian did so as well...it would almost be expected.

**It skipped ahead to Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng, and Nie Huaisang sitting on some rocks in a stream.**

**“He asked you to piss off?” Nie Huaisang wondered as the other laughed, “Wei-xiong, you are unbelievable.” He wagged his fan at him, “It’s the first time I’ve heard Lan**

**Wangji say piss off. How can you make it happen, Wei-xiong?"**

**"It was my pleasure to help him break the rules," Wei Wuxian declared, "I'll tell everyone that I am the first one."**

**"Why are you so proud?" Jiang Cheng interjected, "What are you proud of? Is it great to be asked to piss off? Our clan is disgraced because of you."**

**Wei Wuxian pointed a finger, "I did apologize to him. He not only refused it, but he also punished me with the Silencing spell. Why can't I play a trick on him?" Nie Huaisang nodded as he fanned himself, "It's a pity that I lost the Rare Beauty Collection I got from Nie-xiong."**

**"Huaisang!"**

Nie Huaisang flinched away from his brother, his snickering abruptly dying at the revelation that he had a hand in the prank against Lan Wangji. He held up his hands pleadingly, "Hey! It was unfair for Wei-xiong to be punished. Why shouldn't I help mess with the head of discipline?"

**"Is that why you did it?" Nie Mingjue narrowed his eyes, "Or did you just want to secretly cause chaos?"**

**"Da-ge!" Nie Huaisang complained, "This is in the past. Besides, Wei-xiong wasn't even punished for this."**

**"Only because I never heard of this!" Lan Qiren thundered, "Wangji!"**

Lan Wangji straightened, despite his already perfect posture, "You will see why I forgot."

With that ominous statement, the laughter died completely.

**"I didn't get time to have a look." Wei Wuxian continued, "I gave it to him, but he received it with malice. Good for him. It's a waste of his face."**

**"Never mind, never mind," Nie Huaisang dismissed, "I've got plenty of those." He seemed to consider the story, "Right. Did you say my name?"**

**"Am I the type to be a traitor?" Wei Wuxian asked.**

No, those who knew him best thought privately.

Maybe, many in the room contemplated, not seeing the Yiling Patriarch in the boy who just wanted to have fun. This was all before the demonic cultivation, but all those who sought to use resentful energy before already harbored evil in their hearts. Wen Ruohan was a tyrant long before he got the Yin Iron.

Very few were certain the answer was yes.



**Nie Huaisang smiled, but Jiang Cheng curled up, “You offended both Lan Wangji and Lan Qiren. You are dead. Nobody will save you.”**

**Wei Wuxian sighed, then went to his brother’s side, grabbing his arm, “Jiang Cheng, why do you think so much? Play tricks first. Besides, you’ve helped me so many times. Just do it for me one more time.”**

**Jiang Cheng wasn’t impressed, “If it happens again, don’t tell me and don’t let me see it.” He shoved his brother away, “Piss off.”**

“He’s really good at infuriating people, isn’t he?” Nie Huaisang sighed.

He missed that.

Wei Wuxian didn’t care about rank or power. He only cared for the heart of the people around him. It didn’t matter if Wen Ning or himself were cowards and weaklings, he considered them friends because they were nice.

He didn't need any more reason than that.

**Wei Wuxian leaned back, but before anymore teasing could commence they noticed something in the trees. Wei Wuxian shushed them, then aimed a talisman at it. A bird emerged, and they watched it take flight, “Isn’t that the owl of the QishanWen?” Nie Huaisang asked, “Why is it here?”**

**“The QishanWen?” Wei Wuxian repeated, “How do you know it is their owl?”**

**“Qinghe is at the foot of Qishan,” Nie Huaisang answered, “We see this kind of owl very often.” He leaned closer, “It is said that the owls are the spies of the Wen Sect.”**

**Jiang Cheng frowned, “Then why is the owl flying around Cloud Recesses?”**

**“I don’t know,” Nie Huaisang frowned as well, “Can the Wen Sect control everything, even cultivators like us?”**

“They certainly tried,” Nie Mingjue growled, his annoyance with his brother forgotten with the reminder of his hatred of Wens.

Hanguang-Jun’s statement made sense. What concern were childish pranks when the Wen Sect was making moves? What were petty feuds in the face of a war?

**It cut to Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji walking through Cloud Recesses. The younger spoke, “Xiongzhang. Recently, something strange happened inside the wards of the back hill. Though the wards have not been broken yet, they have been disrupted.”**

**“Did you find out who had gotten into the back hill?” Lan Xichen asked.**

**There was a pause, then Lan Wangji answered, “Wei Ying.”**

Jiang Cheng choked, “You suspected Wei Wuxian?”

Lan Wangji met his gaze easily, “I was wrong.”

“Ah, don’t be so mean, Jiang-xiong,” Nie Huaisang interjected, “Wei-xiong already showed he’s good at breaking wards, and he always scared Wen Qing away before anyone else saw her.” He paused, “Not to mention personal prejudice makes suspicion easier.”

He snorted, but agreed.

If Wei Wuxian had remained the bright, cheerful person who made friends wherever he went, even with the demonic cultivation he wouldn’t be accused of such crimes. It was because he became angry, darker, more dangerous, that people began to fear him. The fear turned into suspicion, and suspicion into accusations which forced him into exile.

For some reason, he didn’t feel like Nie Huaisang was talking about just Wei Wuxian.

**Lan Xichen glanced at his brother, then smiled. His brother glanced back, “Zewu-Jun, do we need to reinforce the wards?”**

**Lan Xichen shook his head, “The ward was set by the ancestors. As long as she doesn’t go inside, the ward will not break.”**

**“She?” Lan Wangji noticed.**

The present Lan Wangji tensed. There were few secrets between him and his brother, but this was one of them. His brother feared the Wen’s presence. His brother feared the Yin Iron’s discovery. Yet he chose to share those fears with Uncle, not him.

Though maybe he should have paid attention to politics more. Then he too would have kept a watchful eye on the Wen siblings.

And on the Jin.

**Lan Xichen stopped walking, “Forget about this.” He turned to full face his brother, “Wangji-”**

**They were interrupted, “Zongzhu.” It was Su She, when he was a Lan disciple. He greeted them.**

A few shot looks at the Su Sect Leader.

Rumors about him were split. Some admired the hard work and dedication it took to create a new Sect. Others heard that he’d been kicked out of the Lan Sect in disgrace, and the Su Sect was a bad imitation of the prestigious Sect he’d been thrown out of. As the Lan Sect wasn’t one to deal in rumors, there was never a confirmation or denial of either.

**Lan Xichen asked, “What’s the matter?”**

**“The villagers came to report that Caiyi Town is being haunted by water ghosts these days. There are lots of victims,” Su She reported as the brothers shared a look, “The villagers are petitioning for the help of the Lan Sect.”**

**“Water ghosts?” He asked, “The people in Caiyi Town are good at swimming, drowning rarely happens. Where did the water ghosts come from?”**

**“Well...” Su She trailed off, “I don’t know.” There was silence, then he offered, “Zongzhu, do you need me to perform the exorcism?”**

**Lan Xichen shook his head, “Reply to the villagers for me. I will go there tomorrow morning to do the exorcism.”**

Many of them had heard about an incident in Caiyi Town.

Not in detail, of course. So much happened so soon after it for the stories of whatever killed the merchants to gain much traction. They wondered what tragedy could have occurred that created the water ghosts.

If the people all knew how to swim...it was suspicious indeed.

**It cut back to Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng approaching their sister’s guest quarters. Before they could open the doors, someone else did. It was Wen Qing.**

**“Wen-guniang.” Wei Wuxian said.**

**“Wen-guniang,” Jiang Cheng beamed, then saluted.**

**She bowed back, “Jiang-gongzi.”**

**“Wen-guniang,” He repeated, “Why are you here?”**

How could she have missed this?

Jiang Yanli hid a small smile at how adorable A-Cheng was. There was none of his surliness when he saw Wen Qing. Instead, there was a bright smile, almost nervous as he repeated her address and spoke to her. It only appeared to be a crush at this moment, but her youngest brother never took a romantic interest in others.

Her husband shot her a strange look, but she didn’t dare say anything where other ears could hear.

After all, not everyone knew Wen Qing as well as her. Until she showed she was worthy of A-Cheng’s affections, she would not make them known.

**“Wen-guniang,” Wei Wuxian complained, “Why do you ignore me?”**

**Before she could answer either, Jiang Yanli called, “A-Xian, here you are.”**

**“I’m here,” He called back, then awkwardly slid around Wen Qing and into the room. He sat on the bed next to his sister, “Shijie, why are you here?”**

**She sighed, “It’s been rainy these days. I felt dizzy when I went to the riverbank this morning. I was lucky that I met Wen-guniang. Not only did she come back with me, but**

**she also gave me some medicine. I've gotten better now."**

**"A-Jie," Jiang Cheng complained, "Why didn't you tell us you were sick?"**

**"That conservative Lan Zhan is to blame," Wei Wuxian grumbled, "He put me in confinement for three days. Shijie must have been sick because she missed me."**

**She smiled, and tapped the tip of his nose. Wen Qing stilled as she packed away her medical supplies, thinking back to her and her own brother. She looked down sadly.**

**"Oh," Nie Huaisang whispered.**

**"What?" His brother snapped.**

He shook his head, refusing to answer. It was sad, really. Wen Qing desperately tried to shield her brother from Wen Ruohan. No wonder she took such a liking to the Jiang siblings, who were also just desperately trying to save each other from their enemies. Wen Qing saw Wei Wuxian as someone similar to Wen Ning, a beloved little brother.

It stood to reason that Wei Wuxian saw Wen Qing as someone like Jiang Yanli.

In the end, this was about family, not politics. Love, not power.

**Jiang Cheng approached her, "Wen-guniang. Thank you so much."**

**"You're welcome, Jiang-gongzi," She replied, "I'm a doctor. It's my duty to cure people."**

A suspicion stirred in Jin Zixuan's mind.

Jiang Wanyin was never like this with anyone. At least, not where he could see. A-Li promised he was different in private with the people he trusted, but for Wen Qing to be treated like this?

No, he couldn't have a more tragic love story than Wei Wuxian. Fate couldn't be so cruel to the Jiang Sect to give them such obstacles to happiness. But Jiang Wanyin hadn't so much as looked at any of the eligible ladies put before him. He bent to the other Sects when it came to casting out his brother, but not on the matter of marriage.

Then again, neither of their parents married for love. If the only woman he loved was impossible for him to marry...then he very well might stay a bachelor for the rest of his life.

Which would make A-Li sad.

**"Shijie," Wei Wuxian continued smiling at his sister, "I've heard that Grandmaster Lan is going to Qinghe for the cultivation conference, so we don't have classes these days and I've heard that Zewu-Jun is going to the town to hunt and exorcise some water ghosts." Wen Qing looked up, "If we set off now, we can catch up with them."**

**"Must he always involve himself in others' business?" Nie Mingjue muttered.**

“If you can help someone, shouldn’t you?” His little brother murmured back.

Yes and no.

Yes, because they hunted demonic beings to save people, not for glory.

No because there was a reason they were in Sects. Each Sect was responsible for hunting in certain areas and protecting those they promised to protect. To encroach upon their territory was to imply they were incapable. It was a great insult.

But what was an insult if lives were saved?

**“Water ghosts?” Wen Qing asked.**

**“Yes,” Jiang Cheng confirmed, “It is said that Caiyi Town is being haunted by water ghosts these days. It’s really strange.”**

**The three of them travelled together to catch up to Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji. They saluted.**

**“Zewu-Jun,” Jiang Cheng started, “It’s said that there are water ghosts near Biling Lake.” Wei Wuxian nodded, “And we don’t have lectures these days so we want to go practice with you.”**

**“Yes,” Wei Wuxian added, “Let us go with you.”**

**“It’s against the rules,” Lan Wangji said.**

“Such dislike.”

Lan Wangji’s ears burned. It did look like he hated Wei Ying. Only he and his brother knew his heart. He hoped Wei Ying knew the truth as well...

“Who would want to nighthunt with Wei Wuxian?”

“Why would Hanguang-Jun trust him?”

His brother glanced at him, but he took the whispers in stride. He should not have been so harsh with Wei Ying. If he’d responded to him in a more positive manner...would events have unfolded the same way? Would Wei Ying have trusted him to help him? Could he have convinced him to go back to Cloud Recesses?

**“Why?” Wei Wuxian asked, “Yunmeng has a lot of brooks. Jiang Cheng and I played near water during our childhood. Taking on water ghosts is easy for us.” He tapped his brother’s chest with his sword, “Besides, we don’t have courses these days.”**

**“Right, Zewu-Jun,” Jiang Cheng repeated, “Yunmeng has so many rivers. We can help you for sure.”**

**“There’s no need,” Lan Wangji denied again, getting frustrated looks from the other two boys.**

**“Then the two young masters, please follow me,” Lan Xichen contradicted his younger brother.**

Jin Guangyao never thought Lan Xichen could be manipulative, but there he was, using someone for his own interests.

Yes, he was using Wei Wuxian to draw Lan Wangji out of his self-imposed isolation, but it was the principle of the action. Some of the worst things were done with the best intentions. He glanced at his sworn brother, who was keeping his expression carefully controlled. Did he regret pushing the two of them together?

Did he regret bringing Wei Wuxian in close enough to discover the Yin Iron? He wasn’t certain of how events would have happened if Wei Wuxian remained ignorant of the true beginning of the Sunshot Campaign? Would he have become a demonic cultivator at all if he’d never gone to Gusu?

**“Lan-zongzhu,” Wen Qing spoke up, “I want to hone my skills too.”**

**“Zewu-Jun, Wen-guniang is well versed in medicine,” Wei Wuxian said, “Although the water ghosts are easy to deal with, some ordinary villager may be hurt during the exorcism and she can do the job of curing them.”**

**“Then, Wen-guniang, please go with us,” Lan Xichen allowed.**

“Keeping your enemies close,” Jin Zixuan noted.

Except they weren’t really enemies, were they? They were Wen, Jiang, and Lan, but half the group knew nothing of what was going to come. Wei Wuxian was being the suspiciously eager person he always was, and Wen Qing was just doing what she was threatened to do.

Were they enemies now?

He took his son back from his mother, cradling the peaceful child and letting him play with Suihua. He’d been behaving so far, but what did he have to cry over? In a few days he would have another doting uncle, one who could protect him from anything. He’d never shared his wife’s confidence in Wei Wuxian.

But he was starting to.

**The trio exchanged pleased looks, and then Wen Ning came running towards them, “A-Jie! Wait for me!” He caught up.**

**“Wen Ning,” Wei Wuxian peered at him.**

**“Why did you come?” Wen Qing demanded, “I’ve told you, I...” She trailed off and glanced at those who could hear her.**

**“A-Jie,” Wen Ning said, “I heard that you are going to do the exorcism of water ghosts. I want to go with you to see the ghosts.”**

**“A-Ning,” She patted his head, then placed her hand on his shoulder, “It might be very dangerous. I asked you to stay there, why don’t you listen?”**

Nie Mingjue felt a stab of something.

It made him distinctly uncomfortable. Wen Qing’s little brother was a nervous weakling. It was something he didn’t expect them to have in common. Xichen could always depend on Lan Wangji to take care of himself, but he would forever worry about Huaisang.

Huaisang, who would definitely be the Sect Leader one day, who would be left to fend for himself when Qi deviation eventually ripped him away.

What would he do to find Huaisang, if he went missing? Would he ask a demonic cultivator to resurrect him if he found him dead?

**Wen Ning didn’t look like he knew what to say to that. He didn’t have to, as Wei Wuxian spoke up, “Wen-guniang, your brother is very talented and is a vastly superior archer. I don’t think anything will go wrong. And I’ll protect him. It will be alright. A simple exorcism of water ghosts won’t be that dangerous.”**

Jiang Cheng hid his clenched fists. There it was again. Wei Wuxian went and promised his protection to Wen Ning, after only having known him a few weeks.

What about him was so special?

**She turned, “Lan-zongzhu, my brother is young and impolite, he came here because of his curiosity for water ghosts as Qishan is dry and mountainous. But, Lan-zongzhu, don’t worry, A-Ning and I won’t interrupt the exorcism.” Wen Ning nodded, “Forgive us and allow my brother to go with us, please.”**

**“Never mind, Wen-guniang,” Lan Xichen said, “Since he came, let him go with us.”**

“You didn’t go, Zixuan?” Jin Guangshan frowned.

“I did not hear the same rumors,” His son answered stiffly.

He hummed, disappointed in his own son. Wei Wuxian was powerful, but he hadn’t realized how much more useful he could be alive rather than dead. He also underestimated how kind the demonic cultivator was. Perhaps the way to control him wasn’t through threats. Perhaps it was through appearing weak.

His bastard would be perfect for such a task.

I had a dream where someone commented that the chapters were too long, so that's why this one's a little shorter. The Aqua Demon/Waterborne Abyss will be the next chapter!

Hopefully I'll post more soon! I didn't end up with as much free time as I hoped over the holidays.



# Lan Xichen, The Best Brother

## Chapter Summary

Or wingman. Either way, he has a devious side Nie Mingjue and Jin Guangyao absolutely enjoy.

## Chapter Notes

Do you ever watch the news for five hours and decide to write fanfiction to distract yourself from how terrible your country is?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

**The night hunting party walked out the gate. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were in the lead, the Wen siblings behind them. The Lan brothers and their disciples followed after at a more sedate pace. Lan Wangji stared at them, “Xiongzhang, why did you let them come? It’s not an easy case. We should take it more seriously.”**

**“I looked at you,” Lan Xichen answered, “You seemed to want the two boys to go together, so I said yes.” He stopped and looked searchingly at his brother, “Don’t you want them to?” Lan Wangji averted his gaze first.**

Jin Guangyao took a sip of his tea to hide his smile. He enjoyed watching Lan Xichen be manipulative. It made him seem less perfect, in a way. The Lan Sect rules were very clear on certain matters. When one spoke their intention should be clear. There was no bullying or teasing.

It wasn’t an exact rule, but he certainly shouldn’t be trying to push his brother into a cutsleeve relationship with another Sect’s head disciple.

It was nice to see he could be devious.

**It skipped again to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji entering their room at an inn.**

**“Honored guests, welcome,” The innkeeper led them in.**

**Wei Wuxian started examining the room, wiping his hands to search for dust. He sneezed, “Your place looks a little dirty.”**

Nie Mingjue laughed, “Xichen, how shameless are you?”

His little brother chortled, “Jiang-xiong, how did Wei-xiong and Hanguang-Jun end up rooming together?”

When both of them were travelling with their brothers? It was obviously more appropriate to have family room with family, and the only person who could have possibly persuaded the group otherwise was the peerless First Jade. It was obvious from the memories he wanted to give Wei Wuxian as many opportunities as he needed to become friends with Lan Wangji.

“I didn’t realize Zewu-Jun had ulterior motives,” The Jiang Sect Leader’s gaze darkened.

Of course, because it wasn’t quite friendship was it? And if their intimacy went beyond emotional...

It only made him laugh harder. How could Xichen sit there and look perfect when his shamelessness was being exposed? Even now his expression was only mildly embarrassed. He clapped his little brother on the shoulder, “Be happy I’ve never taken a vested interest in your relationships, Huaisang.”

His little brother opened his fan to hide his grin, “If only you had relationships to interfere with, Da-ge. I’d be so much worse.”

“Nothing happened,” Hanguang-Jun said.

“There?” Huaisang teased, “Or never?”

Hanguang-Jun’s silence made him laugh again. He knew it would be tragic for Xichen’s little brother to be in love with a demonic cultivator, but he also knew this would help in convincing Xichen that Jin Guangyao was using him. It was hard to see past one’s affections to the true heart of another. There was no greater example than this.

**The man laughed nervously, “Sir, forgive me. To be honest, since the lake started to eat people, our inn hasn’t had any guests. You two are the first guests since then.” Lan Wangji turned to look at him, “So please help yourselves.”**

**“Eat humans?” Wei Wuxian repeated, “Water ghosts are spirits of water critters. Why do they eat humans?”**

**“I don’t know what’s under the lake,” The innkeeper said, “Biling Lake had been calm and safe for many years, but something happened. There were some foreign businessmen two months ago. Their ships sank. At first, no one took it seriously, but more ships sank, even the local ones. It rarely happened before.”**

**“How about the people inside those ships?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**The man looked horrified, “All of them were eaten.”**

The gathered cultivators shared theories.

It certainly was strange. If it were a lake where some tragedy occurred, then it would make sense for a demonic entity to emerge from that tragedy. But this was a reversal of the order. A demonic entity suddenly appeared, causing more tragedy and gaining power each time it did so.

Why would it suddenly appear?

**“Did you see what ate them?” Lan Wangji inquired.**

**“Well...I didn’t,” The man answered.**

**“Then how can you be so sure that it was done by the things in the lake?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**“The people were certainly eaten,” The innkeeper insisted, “Many people have drowned and no one has ever returned. Not even a dead body was found.” He looked down and breathed shakily, then bowed and left the room.**

**Wei Wuxian turned to Lan Wangji, then they moved further into the room. Lan Wangji went to sit at the desk while Wei Wuxian leaned on a pillar, “Wangji-xiong, do you think the things in the lake are water ghosts?”**

**“We can’t conclude before we see the whole picture,” Lan Wangji replied.**

A gentle reminder about why they were all gathered. This was almost the whole picture.

**“But I don’t think they are,” Wei Wuxian continued, moving to sit opposite the desk, “If those things aren’t water ghosts, what are they?” No response, “How about this? Let’s make a bet. I bet we think the same.”**

**“Boring,” Lan Wangji stared blankly at him, then closed his eyes.**

Nie Huaisang laughed. That was certainly one way to ignore they were sharing a room.

Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun were left alone a lot. He was very curious to see what they got up to. He glanced at the artists intermixed in the crowd. He’d brought them in because everyone involved was beautiful and deserved to be depicted as such, but he caught a few authors making notes. It was an interesting dichotomy.

They were so different, yet somehow they fit so well together.

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian complained. When he received no reaction he leaned further on the desk, “Lan Zhan!” At being continually ignored, he sighed, “So dull.” He picked up his sword and moved to one of the beds.**

Lan Qiren wondered when his nephew stopped ignoring the demon child. He was so resolute in these memories.

Was it Xichen’s fault? Or was Wangji just doomed to the same fate as his father.

**It skipped to the next day, when they were walking on a path to the lake. Jiang Cheng was talking, “I heard a fisherman died yesterday. I’d like to see how much power these little ghosts have. Usually water ghosts just play tricks on people now they even dare to eat humans.”**

**“Zewu-Jun,” Wei Wuxian moved up the line, “Besides the villagers, is there anyone else who has seen these things?”**

**“The ghosts are so crafty,” Lan Xichen answered, “Once people are dragged into the water, they can barely swim back. No one has ever seen their true appearance.”**

**“Then, Zewu-Jun,” Wei Wuxian swirled the jar in his hand and lowered his voice, “How are the cases of spirit snatching going?”**

**“So clever.”**

Zewu-Jun said to assume Wei Wuxian was correct in his theories. If the spirit snatching was related to the water ghosts, then they were both caused by Yin Iron.

Whispers started up again. They knew little of what the Yin Iron could do. In Wen Ruohan’s hands it made puppets and fierce corpses out of cultivators. In Wei Wuxian’s hands he stole the control of those puppets and fierce corpses for his own.

It was frightening to see how it caused problems without a master, that even the Lan Sect, and a place as sacred as the Cloud Recesses, couldn’t contain it forever.

Maybe it was for the best that it stayed in the Burial Mounds with the Yiling Patriarch.

**“Wei-gongzi, why do you ask?” Lan Xichen wondered.**

**Wei Wuxian continued to move the jar, “Spiritual energy has been surging in Cloud Recesses since ancient times. But now, there are cultivators’ souls being snatched and there are even water ghosts. Do you think they are related?”**

**Lan Xichen smiled, “We are looking into the spirit snatching, but the water ghosts in the lake I don’t think are related.”**

**Wei Wuxian inhaled, “But-”**

**“Wei-gongzi,” Lan Xichen interrupted, “The most important thing now is the exorcism.”**

**“Isn’t interrupting against the rules?” Jiang Wanyin asked.**

Lan Xichen nodded, but declined to verbally answer. It was obvious the Jiang Sect Leader was angry and he wasn’t sure why.

Yes, Lan Xichen was angry at himself. He pushed Wangji and Wei Wuxian together. He was so relieved his brother wouldn’t be alone he ignored his own Sect’s rules. If they weren’t in public, his uncle would be scolding him for his actions.

But why was Jiang Wanyin so upset? Wangji was the one worse off from their turbulent relationship. It was his brother who was punished by the elders for visiting the Burial Mounds. It was Wangji who was confused and hurt, the rules he'd built his life on suddenly in doubt.

Perhaps Wei Wuxian suffered, but his hell was his own making. There were other paths, yet he chose the heretic one.

He took a deep breath. He promised to be unbiased in this. The truth didn't care for his feelings. Wei Wuxian breaking his brother's heart wasn't a crime.

**“Zewu-Jun is right,” Jiang Cheng agreed, “We can’t waste time.”**

**Wei Wuxian fell back as Lan Xichen picked up the pace, and intercepted Lan Wangji before he could follow, “Lan Zhan, do you want to drink?” He offered, but was ignored, “Lan Zhan, tell me, is there any progress on the investigation?”**

**“Not yet,” Lan Wangji answered.**

**Wei Wuxian frowned, “But I feel that your brother is hiding something from us.” Lan Wangji paused, his eyes flickering towards him. His expression lit up, “You also feel that your brother is hiding something and I bet it’s not a trivial matter.” Lan Wangji grabbed the jar, “How can it be-”**

**He poured the alcohol on the ground. When it was empty, he handed the jar back to a stunned Wei Wuxian, “No liquor is allowed during the night hunt.”**

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian protested, “Why don’t I know that? I haven’t even tasted a drop.”**

Jiang Cheng fought back another wave of anger.

Wei Wuxian told him none of this. It burned to see him keeping secrets, to watch as he conspired with Zewu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun, even when he stood a few feet away. If he'd told him...

Maybe he could have stopped this. He could have beaten it through his thick skull that he was the head disciple of the Jiang Sect. He shouldn't involve himself in the affairs of other Sects. He shouldn't sacrifice his time or energy for those who didn't ask him for help, for those who didn't deserve his help. If he kept him out of this...

No. Wei Wuxian was always the hero. He did what he thought was right, even when it seemed impossible, even when it wasn't worth it in the end.

He wondered if he was happy in the Burial Mounds, if he wasn't burning with the same regrets.

**They finally made it to the lakes and got on boats. Lan Xichen was with several Lan disciples, with two boats flanking him, one with Lan Wangji, the other with Wei**

**Wuxian. Behind Lan Wangji was the boat with the Wen siblings. Behind Wei Wuxian's was the one with Jiang Cheng. The final boat held the remaining Lan disciples.**

**They looked around in the fog, Lan Xichen calling out, "Everyone, be careful. We're near the haunted area."**

**"Zewu-Jun," Wei Wuxian called back, "The ghosts are so cunning. If they keep hiding in the water, are we just going to search forever? What if we can't find them?"**

**"It's our duty," Lan Wangji responded, "We'll keep searching until we find them."**

**Wei Wuxian started to say something, but his attention was drawn to Lan Wangji's boat. He picked up his oar, "Lan Zhan, look at me!" He swung at the boat, flipping it over to reveal the demonic entity beneath it.**

**Lan Wangji jumped and landed next to him, "Boring."**

MianMian fought back a laugh at his ridiculous antics. Others would criticize him for being shameless and irreverent, but he was truly skilled and righteous. These memories were only showing off how good he was, in both cultivation and morality.

"He's so observant."

"Does he just pretend to be an idiot?"

"You don't want to see him being serious," She commented, ignoring the suspicious looks shot her way.

Wei Wuxian didn't care about politics. That was his greatest flaw. He wasn't a Sect Heir, he was a head disciple. Jiang Wanyin was the one concerned with appearances and courtesies. Wei Wuxian's concern was bringing glory to his Sect through demonstrating his skills. Since he was so skilled, he cared little for everything else.

It was never that he didn't notice the world turning on him. He just didn't let it change him.

There were some compromises that couldn't be made. She couldn't continue to serve the Jin Sect, just as he could no longer keep his place in the cultivation world.

**"What was that?" Wei Wuxian wondered.**

**"I've never seen a water ghost like that," Jiang Cheng frowned worriedly.**

**"Don't tell me they are tainted by something," Wen Qing said.**

**"Wei-gongzi," Lan Xichen started, "How did you know they were under the boat?"**

**"Easy," Wei Wuxian answered, "The movement is strange."**

**"What's strange?" Wen Qing asked.**

**“Just now, the boat had only one person on it,” Wei Wuxian explained, “But it sank deeper than the boat carrying two people, so there must be water ghosts under it.”**

**“You’re knowledgeable,” Lan Xichen praised.**

Truly, someone worthy of standing at Hanguang-Jun’s side.

Jiang Yanli sighed sadly. There was no stopping A-Xian once he decided he needed to act. As much as she wished he would restrain himself, think about himself before others, it simply wasn’t who he was. He was unselfish to a fault.

**Wei Wuxian’s smile lasted until he saw the still annoyed expression on Lan Wangji’s face. He brought his hands together, “Lan Zhan, I didn’t splash water on purpose. It’s because the water ghosts are so cunning. If I said the truth, they would run away.” He peered at him, “Lan-er-gongzi, you just poured out my liquor and I didn’t say a word.”**

**He moved to his side, and brushed their shoulders together, “Now are we even?”**

**“Stay away from me,” Lan Wangji coldly stated.**

**Wei Wuxian bent down in front of him to retrieve his sword, then backed away annoyed.**

Lan Wangji internally flinched. Seeing his actions from the outside, without evidence of the storm of emotions in him, made him look cold. He understood even more now why others called him emotionless. He could have easily lost Wei Ying earlier to his own stubbornness.

Jin Zixuan outwardly winced. He almost felt bad for Hanguang-Jun. At least when he was harsh to A-Li, it was only with his words, and she forgave him for his stubbornness. There was no resolution between Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian. There was only distance and misunderstanding.

**The hunt continued in silence, only broken by the occasional creaking of the boats. When one of the entities attacked, it was Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji’s boat. With a quick motion, Lan Wangji sliced it.**

**“Catch it!” Jiang Cheng shouted.**

**“Watch the right!” Wen Qing warned.**

**Wei Wuxian ordered his blade to cut through it as well, but the entity just disappeared.**

This was obviously not water ghosts.

It was mesmerizing to watch the skilled young Masters of the Jiang and Lan Sects continue to fight anyways.

Many waited for the Wen siblings to strike. After all, they weren’t there with pure intentions. They were Wen. It was only a matter of time before they showed their true colors. What

better way to harm the Lan Sect than to sabotage a dangerous night hunt with the Sect Leader and Heir present? Especially with the fog thickening with every moment.

It didn't matter if they failed. What mattered was that they tried.

**Lan Wangji looked at him, "What's the name of this sword?"**

**"Suibian," Wei Wuxian answered. When the other slightly narrowed his eyes, he repeated, slower, "Suibian."**

**His gaze flickered down, "This sword has a spirit. It's offensive to call it whatever you want."**

**"I didn't ask you to call it whatever I want," Wei Wuxian replied, "It's name is Suibian." Lan Wangji just blinked, so he held his sword up, showing the inscription "Look." He did so, "I know what you want to say. You want to ask why I picked this name, if there was any special meaning to it. Actually, there's nothing special."**

**"When Jiang-shushu gave it to me, he asked me how I would name it," He continued, "I had thought of more than twenty names, but none of them were good enough. So I said Suibian. I think Suibian is not so bad."**

**"Ridiculous," Lan Wangji turned away.**

**"Well, I don't think so," Wei Wuxian smiled at Suibian.**

He obviously loved his sword.

"Why would he set it aside?" Nie Mingjue muttered, but he was far from the only one wondering the same.

It was given to him by Jiang Fengmian. It was named by Jiang Fengmian. A joke, at that, to match his trickster personality. Maybe the connection made it too painful to bear after his death. Maybe he blamed himself so much for the destruction of Lotus Pier and the death of the former Sect Leader that he couldn't wield it once it was recovered from the Wen.

Maybe it had nothing to do with demonic cultivation at all.

It was difficult to build a connection to a new sword. Too difficult to attempt in the middle of a war. If he couldn't wield Suibian out of grief...maybe they could forgive his disrespect.

**The night hunt continued, Lan Xichen observing, "The fog is getting thicker. Be careful."**

**The next person attacked was Jiang Cheng. Wei Wuxian called out to him, "Jiang Cheng, are you okay?" In his boat, Jiang Cheng examined the wound on his leg. Wei Wuxian called out again, "Jiang Cheng, where are you?"**

**"I'm fine!" He assured the others.**



**But Wen Qing had already leaped to his boat, “Jiang-gongzi.”**

**“Wen-guniang,” He returned.**

**“You got hurt,” She noted.**

**“Wen-guniang,” He tried to hide it, “I’m fine.”**

Was this it? Was she going to try something while the Jian Sect Heir was vulnerable?

**She set down her sword and crouched in front of him, pulling the robes back so she could get a good look. Jiang Cheng watched her as she reached into her robes and pulled out a little vial of powder. He inhaled sharply as it was applied, then looked away.**

**“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian called again, “Are you okay?”**

**“I’m fine!” He repeated.**

**“You’re lucky that it just wounded your skin,” Wen Qing informed him, finally meeting his gaze, “It will recover in a few days.” He nodded weakly.**

There were a few murmurs about his odd behavior. The Jiang Sect Leader was famously like his mother in temperament. They’d watch him be grumpy and ill-tempered with his brother, and serious with everyone else. His real smiles were drawn out by his sister, and this shy embarrassment had never been seen before.

Jiang Yanli thought it was adorable. It was all she could do to coo at her son instead of the projection.

Maybe Jin Ling could have cousins.

**Then Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian were attacked again, forced to flee to the boat with Wen Qing and Jiang Cheng. Wen Ning kept his sword drawn, raising his voice to note, “The color of the water...” It was changing.**

**“Get back now,” Lan Wangji ordered, “The thing in the water deliberately led us to the center of the lake. Go now!”**

**Their boats rocked. Su She shouted, “What happened?”**

**“Look,” Jiang Cheng said, “They’re coming together.”**

**“Waterborne Abyss,” Wei Wuxian figured out, “It’s a Waterborne Abyss!” The others in the group looked to each other as he continued, “The water ghosts came together and became a Waterborne Abyss. They want to eat all of us!”**

Nie Huaisang was grateful he turned down his friends when they invited him to come. A Waterborne Abyss was no small matter.

“The Yin Iron can cause such events?” He asked aloud, deciding now was as good as any time to start this discussion, “Even without a Master?”

“It should be destroyed,” His brother growled, tense since the night hunt began.

Jin Zixun scoffed, “Like Wei Wuxian would allow us to destroy his strongest weapon.”

“He would,” Jiang Cheng countered, “He keeps it to protect the Wens. Remove the threat against them and he will be open to destroying it.”

Even if the Wens were guilty, it would be worth sparing their lives if it meant their people wouldn’t one day die from some evil connected to the Yin Iron. Wei Wuxian was unlikely to cultivate to immortality, and they were just asking for history to repeat themselves if they tried to seal it away. Sooner, as more people knew about it.

“Would that even be possible?” Jin Guangyao wondered.

Lan Xichen looked thoughtful, “We destroyed Wen Ruohan’s Yin Iron shards because Wei Wuxian already neutralized them. I can’t imagine the power it would take to destroy the Stygian Tiger Amulet.”

“We’ll learn more when we see how it was created,” Jin Guangshan decided, “If it can’t...”

“It needs to be,” His older brother nearly snarled, “That power shouldn’t be in anyone’s hands.”

If Nie Huaisang had to trust it with anyone, it would be Wei Wuxian, but he couldn’t say that yet.

**“Wei-gongzi!” Wen Ning asked, “What should we do?”**

**“Ride the sword,” Lan Wangji decided.**

**The four of them lifted into the air. Lan Xichen, seeing his brother’s decision, quickly followed. Su She, meanwhile, decided to attack the Waterborne Abyss, losing his sword in the process. He couldn’t summon it back. Everyone else lifted into the air, and the boat started spinning. Wen Ning noticed Su She’s struggle.**

**Lan Xichen began to play as Wen Ning leaped to Su She’s boat. But before he could reach him, he froze.**

Wen Qing helped Jiang Wanyin, but perhaps Wen Ning wasn’t quite the coward he appeared to be.

**“A-Ning!” Wen Qing shouted nervously.**

**Wei Wuxian flew down to assist, but was shocked when Wen Ning opened colorless eyes.**

“What’s wrong with him?” Su She demanded.

He remembered being rescued by Hanguang-Jun. He didn't remember Wen Ning attempting to rescue him. He'd never paid Wen Ning any mind either. He assumed he was just the same as the rest of his blood.

"Wen Ruohan," Hanguang-Jun answered shortly.

"He experimented on him?" Jiang Wanyin sat up straighter.

Lan Wangji's lips tightened, as though annoyed he needed to speak to them at all, "Wen Qionglin's spirit was affected through Wen Ruohan's actions."

Either way, if Wen Ning hadn't come for him in his stupidity, then Wei Wuxian wouldn't have descended from safety either. Wei Wuxian swore to protect Wen Ning, after all. And if Hanguang-Jun's dear friend wasn't in danger, he wouldn't have pulled the three of them up.

He wasn't so disgraced to not recognize a debt.

**Lan Wangji noted his eyes as well, and flew down to grab Wei Wuxian and Su She. Wei Wuxian managed to keep his grip on Wen Ning.**

It was an embarrassment to the Su Sect Leader, but they would all choose embarrassment over death.

He was foolish to send his sword at a Waterborne Abyss, but foolishness didn't merit expulsion.

So what else could he have done?

**"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian smiled at him, "Lan Zhan, thanks for your help, but why did you grab me by the collar?" He squirmed, "Why don't you just hold me? It makes me uncomfortable. I'll give you my hand. You can just hold my hand."**

**"I don't touch strangers," Lan Wangji replied.**

**"We are very close," Wei Wuxian protested, "I'm not a stranger."**

**"We're not close at all," Lan Wangji said coldly.**

**"You are so ridiculous," Wei Wuxian complained.**

**"You are so ridiculous," Jiang Cheng angrily interjected, "When being held by someone in midair, can you shut your mouth?"**

**"Shut up!" The older brother shouted.**

**"You!" But Jiang Cheng stopped, obviously worried.**

**They watched Lan Xichen continue playing until he sealed the Waterborne Abyss.**

"Well done, Er-ge," Jin Guangyao complimented.

It wasn't lost on anyone in the crowd how it wasn't only his accomplishment. Wei Wuxian identified the demonic entity. Hanguang-Jun realized they needed to get off the water, and his quick reaction kept everyone safe, even if he had to go back and save the last stragglers.

It also wasn't lost on anyone how young they all were. Hanguang-Jun and the future Yiling Patriarch were bickering about hand holding, of all things, and whether or not they counted as friends, acquaintances, or strangers after their time together.

These were the young men sent to war. Their heroes were little more than boys, teenagers who should have had more time to have fun.

**The memories picked up again at the tavern. Wei Wuxian carefully checked Wen Ning's eyes as he laid asleep on the bed. They were back to normal.**

**"Wei Wuxian," Wen Qing addressed him as she walked in with a tray, "What are you doing here?"**

**He glanced away, "I came to visit Wen Ning. The door was open, but what's going on with him? Why is he still unconscious?"**

**"We thought he fainted from fear," Lan Xichen explained.**

He didn't realize it was so severe. Then again, Wen Qing was good at hiding so many things. She hid her true loyalties well enough, though apparently that mask didn't hold up to the Jiang Sect.

**"Wei-gongzi," Wen Qing avoided the question, "A-Ning still needs rest. Please leave if you have nothing else to say." She then sat by her brother's side.**

**Wei Wuxian pulled a talisman from his robes, "This is for you," He announced before tossing it to her.**

**She caught it, "What is it?"**

**"That is a talisman to protect him," He explained.**

That was the second time he promised to protect him.

Jiang Cheng scoffed. Of course he made promises to others, but what made the Wens more deserving of him upholding them? What of the promises they made to each other? Why did Wen Ning deserve his protection more than he deserved him by his side? What was a few weeks to nearly a lifetime?

Was it because Wen Ning was weak? If he appeared weaker, if he lowered himself and begged for him to stay, would he have?

**"Protect him?" She asked.**

**"Though I am not a doctor like you, as for the magic arts, I have my experience," He kept both hands on his sword, "Wen Ning is a cultivator, he's not so weak that he**

**fainted just from the water. Wen-guniang, don't you feel it's strange?"**

**She rose to face him, "Wei-Wuxian, what exactly do you want to say?"**

**He crossed his arms and moved to look closer at Wen Ning, "Did Wen Ning have an unusual experience before? Therefore, he is easily affected by ghosts." She didn't answer, "Wen-guniang, no matter what it is you want in Cloud Recesses, I want you to keep this talisman. And I wish for this talisman to protect him."**

**Something shifted in her gaze, and he continued, "Of course, you can choose not to believe me. If you think this talisman fails to act, just throw it away." With that, he walked away and exited the room.**

**Wen Qing held the talisman closer.**

**"He's so kind," Nie Huaisang sighed.**

**Jin Guangyao took another drink from his cup, listening as others murmured agreements. He'd taken a step back from actively scheming, deciding to actually try to understand Wei Wuxian before making more plans.**

**Unless the resentful energy changed something fundamental about his personality, this man wasn't capable of great evil. He didn't understand why he would devolve into demonic cultivation in the first place, unless Wei Wuxian did it to stand against Wen Ruohan.**

**From his own research into demonic cultivation, the yin energy they controlled enhanced the yin energy of the user. Anger, vengeance, fear...any negativity the cultivator possessed would be multiplied.**

**For someone determined to be positive, he guessed possessing the Stygian Tiger Amulet wouldn't make a change extreme enough to convince anyone he was a villain. But someone had to be the villain. No one wanted to blame themselves, or the traditions and beliefs that created such circumstances, so they would pin their anger on one target.**

**It wasn't going to be him.**

**The memory switched to Jiang Cheng wandering the town alone. A vendor called out about combs, and he moved towards her. He slowed down to look at the combs available.**

**The vendor smiled, "Sir, buy a comb for your girl."**

**He smiled back and shook his head, "I don't need it."**

**He turned to leave, but the vendor called after him, "Sir, don't go. A comb is an emblem of lovesickness. It's the best gift for a girl."**

**Jiang Cheng thought about it, before turning back and buying a dark red comb.**

**"You had a crush on Wen Qing!" Jin Zixuan was happy to have confirmation.**

“And you actually bought her a comb!” Nie Huaisang chirped, “I believe that makes you the only one to follow proper courtship protocols.” He tilted his head, “If you gave it to her, that is.”

“I gave it to her,” Jiang Wanyin tensed.

Jin Zixuan was pointedly ignoring the whispering around the room. He grew up surrounded by rumors. He knew how to block them out. Besides, his father engaged in more scandalous affairs with worse women and everyone still respected him.

As long as no bastards were sired, it would be forgotten quickly.

His focus was on his brother-in-law, “Did she reject you?”

“She accepted,” He bit out, his spiritual whip curling around his arm as he repressed his anger.

“Then how...?” Nie Huaisang trailed off.

Jiang Wanyin laughed bitterly, “People were already questioning my judgment. If I showed up in the middle of the war with a Wen bride, what would that have meant for the Jiang Sect? If I tried to defend her, to protest her innocence, would anyone have believed the words of a lovestruck fool? No! They wouldn’t!”

Jin Zixuan flinched. After all, how quickly was MianMian dismissed simply because there were rumors about her closeness to Wei Wuxian? Even Zewu-Jun hesitated to believe his brother because of their relationship.

His expression darkened, “They would have called her a whore. They would have treated her like a spy, or any other Wen-dog. They’d never accept her as Madam Jiang. She...she had too much pride to stay with me, even if I could have ensured her safety. So she left, and I let her go.”

The halls of Koi Tower had never been silent before, but no one seemed to find the words to respond to that.

Jin Zixuan wished he hadn't said anything.

## Chapter End Notes

I started this story with the intention of it being the antithesis of my other characters watch the series fic. A challenge, of sorts. That one I wrote 3,000 words a day, split 1,000 words per perspective with little direct transcription. I also wrote it in about a month.

This one I'm taking my time with. Chapters will be what they are. Perspectives will be what I think goes with the scenes I've transcribed in advance. Does that make me anxious? Yes. Will I be self-depreciating because of it? Also, yes.

Am I determined to write this anyways? Hell yes.

So thank you to everyone who didn't mind the shorter chapters! And everyone who likes this!

# The Naked Time

## Chapter Summary

How could you possibly get past JC/WQ being revealed?

Easy. Wangxian.

## Chapter Notes

Title is a Star Trek reference.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The oppressive silence in the room lingered.

**It skipped to the next day. The cultivators were floating through the town on boats. Wei Wuxian had a small pile of loquats he was snacking on, while everyone admired the stalls set up around town.**

**“Wangji,” Lan Xichen asked, “What are you thinking about?”**

**“The Waterborne Abyss,” His little brother answered. Then, after a pause, continued, “What Wei Wuxian said was not unreasonable. The cultivators’ spirits were snatched and a Waterborne Abyss appeared. The connection between them, do you have an idea about it?”**

**“Wangji,” He hesitated, “I’m not so sure about this. My only wish is that my assumption is wrong, but if it is not...I’m afraid that we can’t change it either.”**

Lan Xichen grimaced. He should have been more proactive. He should have been the one to find and carry the burden of the Yin Iron.

He shook himself slightly. He didn’t want to admit it, but he was shaken by Jiang Wanyin’s words. His feelings for Wen Qing were obvious. He wasn’t like Jin Zixuan or Wangji. He didn’t hide his feelings behind irritation. He didn’t try to act cold and aloof. He didn’t ignore his heart. He immediately got her a comb within weeks of knowing her.

It was admirable, really. They weren’t separated by misunderstandings, just circumstances.

If Jiang Wanyin returned to the Unclean Realm with Wen Qing and announced her as the next Madame Jiang, the cultivation world would not have accepted it. At best, they would have



demanded he take a second wife to temper her influences, thus dishonoring her. At worst, someone would have killed her to remove her entirely.

It was impossible before he reclaimed Lotus Pier, but even if he had a home to hide her in...it would have become her prison. Just as Cloud Recesses would have become Wei Wuxian's if Wangji had persuaded him to go.

He didn't want that fate for anyone, no matter what they'd done.

**Wei Wuxian seemed to notice the serious conversation going on in the boat in front of him. He looked at his loquats consideringly, then shouted, "Lan Zhan have some loquats!" He launched one at the other's back.**

**Lan Wangji caught it without looking, "No." Then tossed it back without looking.**

**Wei Wuxian caught it with a small pout, "You're so boring." Then he perked up, "Jiang Cheng, catch it." And threw it at his brother.**

**"If you want loquats," Lan Xichen offered, "I can buy you a basket of them."**

**"No," Lan Wangji denied him too.**

Nie Mingjue could tell his best friend was lost in thought, but he still forced a laugh at his version of teasing. He planned on pretending Jiang Wanyin said nothing.

After all, if anyone should hate Wens, it was the young Sect Leader who had everything taken from him. The Sandu Shengshou cut down the enemy without mercy. He took his vengeance in spades.

If he had room in his heart to love one...what did that say about him?

Nie Mingjue hated Wens since his father died. He killed Wen Xu to make Wen Ruohan feel some of his pain. He led the Sunshot Campaign. He ensured the Wen Sect would never rise to power. He never lost the Unclean Realm. He never lost his Sect. He still couldn't bring himself to fully sympathize with Wen Qing's situation.

There was virtue in mercy. The righteous did not seek vengeance past justice. He thought it was justice to condemn Wen Qing, but obviously Jiang Wanyin agreed with Wei Wuxian on this matter. If the Jiang Sect's position was stronger...

Jin Guangyao kept sending him inquiring glances, but of course he didn't know what was weighing on Xichen's mind.

Jiang Wanyin would have married Wen Qing to protect her if she'd let him.

It was too similar to what happened with Madam Lan. There was very little Xichen hadn't told Jin Guangyao. The circumstances of his parent's marriage was one of those.

**While both were looking forward, they didn't notice Wei Wuxian pick up jars of Emperor's Smile from a nearby vendor.**

**The memory skipped to Nie Huaisang walking through Cloud Recesses. It was obviously after curfew, and his gaze darted around as he tried to remain unseen. He ran through the last courtyard to reach a set of doors. He carefully beat out a rhythm on the door.**

**Within seconds, Wei Wuxian opened it, whispering, “What took you so long?”**

**“I grabbed some peanuts,” Nie Huaisang whispered back.**

**Wei Wuxian stuck his head out to check for any Lan disciples, then pulled Nie Huaisang into the room. They used their spare robes to block the windows, and lit the lamps within the space. Then they sat down at a table together to share the drinks.**

Oblivious to the tension running between the major Sect’s leaders, the minor Sects whispered.

Was this why the Yiling Patriarch turned on them? Sect Leader Jiang was good and responsible. He couldn’t abandon his Sect when he was the only one left to build it. He could ask his brother, and head disciple, to protect her in his stead until such a time came where they could get married.

It wasn’t because she was innocent.

Or perhaps she wasn’t their enemy because she loved Jiang Wanyin. Sandu Shengshou didn’t hold back against the Wens, but they heard nothing of Wen Qing’s actions during the war. Did he hide her away somewhere? Did she truly do nothing worthy of condemnation?

What was truth? What was bias? Was bias not evidence of truth or did it prove nothing? How well did anyone know their loved ones?

**It took no time at all for them to be drunk.**

**“Eh, Wei-xiong,” Nie Huaisang commented, “The liquor is really good.” He laughed.**

**“Of course,” Wei Wuxian poured himself another cup, “Here in Gusu, we drink the Emperor’s Smile. Fragrant and mellow, refreshing but not aggressive, smooth and powerful.” He shook his head and downed the cup.**

**“Just drink the liquor,” Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, “You make it sound like it’s a person.”**

**“Jiang-xiong, I disagree,” Nie Huaisang said, “I think Wei-xiong is making an excellent point.” He considered his next cup, “As a wise man said, ‘fine beauty is just like a great wine’.”**

**“Cheers,” Wei Wuxian tapped his cup to the other’s.**

Nie Huaisang fanned himself, hoping this silly scene of them drinking could ease some of the tensions. His brother hadn’t scolded him, but neither was he glowering at Jiang Cheng for

fraternizing with Wens. He was frankly surprised Jin Guangshan didn't say anything, but Jin Zixuan did comment, and his tone was far from critical.

Interesting. Jin Zixuan didn't speak out against his father, but his father didn't speak out against him either.

So long as no major Sect spoke about the affair, no minor Sect would.

They were safe, but they desperately needed a distraction before anyone came up with some crazy theories.

**Jiang Cheng leaned on the table, "If that is true, you shall find your partners by following the fragrance of liquor."**

**Wei Wuxian grinned, "I will be fine as long as I have wine."**

**Jiang Cheng choked on his drink, "I don't know how the GusuLan can put up with you."**

**"Hey," His brother warned, "I am adorable. It's just you. No one can match your standards."**

**"Ah, Wei-xiong," Nie Huaisang leaned closer, his voice teasing, "What standards?"**

**Wei Wuxian's grin widened as Jiang Cheng pointed at him, "Wei Wuxian, I dare you!"**

**"Beauty," Wei Wuxian blurted out, "Natural beauty."**

Wen Qing certainly had both of those.

Jin Guangshan wasn't blind. He strummed his fingers over his table. Was the rift between Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin possibly about a woman? The Yiling Patriarch was known for his discerning taste in the fairer sex.

He could find someone more appealing than Wen Qing, though she was a rare beauty. After so long in the Burial Mounds, surely he would be tiring of her, eager to move on to something new.

And if Wen Qing went back to Jiang Wanyin...well, he wouldn't have to worry about the Jiang Sect gaining any significant power.

**Jiang Cheng rose angrily, "Wei Wuxian!"**

**Wei Wuxian darted behind Nie Huaisang, "Virtuous and caring," He pulled the other boy up to use as a shield, "And comes from a good family." They chased each other around the table, "She should not be too chatty and should have a gentle voice," Nie Huaisang willingly did interference, "But not too capable."**

Wen Qing healed her enemies. She took care of her little brother. The good family was debatable, as she didn't seem to consider Wen Ruohan or his ilk family. She didn't talk much,

and when she did it was a split between gentle and severe. As a doctor, she wasn't capable in the same ways as other cultivators. She was skilled in a way that wouldn't compete with him.

**They were all running now, "There is more." He evaded Jiang Cheng, "She should not burn through money."**

Considering their continued survival in the Burial Mounds, she must be frugal indeed.

"Are all your standards just the opposite of Wei Wuxian?" Her husband wondered, aiming for lightness but still sounded awkward.

Jiang Yanli managed a laugh, "Ah, but one of his standards is that they get along with A-Xian as well."

"Which isn't that hard," Nie Huaisang smiled, "You should be happy that wasn't one of Madam Jiang's standards, Jin Zixuan."

Her laugh at that was softer and more genuine. It hurt to watch A-Cheng be so tense, but he just needed to make it to an obvious sign of Wen Qing's betrayal. Perhaps that was when she sheltered them after their home was burned, but she had a feeling it came sooner. Otherwise why would A-Xian chance their safety with her?

**"You talk too much!" Jiang Cheng shouted.**

**"Hey," Nie Huaisang blocked him again, "It is okay."**

**"Wei Wuxian!" Jiang Cheng lunged, forcing the two of them back on the bed.**

**They didn't notice Lan Wangji walking in. The Lan Sect Heir turned to find Wei Wuxian on his back, getting strangled by Jiang Cheng while Nie Huaisang ineffectually tried to separate them, "Jiang Cheng, get up."**

Jiang Cheng hated everyone but his sister and his nephew.

He knew they wouldn't take his feelings for Wen Qing well. He only needed to last until she was thrown in prison, but of course Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang threw in the memories of their teasing and how he would never meet a woman who matched his standards.

He never expected to and then he met Wen Qing. He felt an instant connection to her. She was a kindred spirit and if anyone dared to speak poorly of that, they would feel Zidian's wrath for weeks.

**They finally noticed him, and scrambled to sit up. Nie Huaisang even opened his fan and fluttered it nervously.**

A few laughed at their feigned nonchalance at getting caught by the head of discipline.

The esteemed young masters got drunk and acted foolish just like any other person.

**Lan Wangji was not impressed, "What are you doing?"**

**Wei Wuxian clapped his hands together and shared a look with his friends. Then he rose, “What a nice coincidence.” He laced his hands together behind his back, “Since you are here, why not join us for a drink? Let’s have a chat.”**

**“Here at Cloud Recesses, alcohol is forbidden,” Lan Wangji recited.**

**Wei Wuxian sighed, “Lan Zhan, don’t be so rigid. We successfully exorcised a Waterborne Abyss today. We made an accomplishment.” He reached out to tug slightly on his sleeve, “Let’s celebrate.” Lan Wangji’s eyes darted to the point of contact, so he let go.**

**“You three, go to the punishment chamber to be disciplined,” Lan Wangji ordered.**

**“Where?” Wei Wuxian shot a look at the other two.**

**“What chamber?” Nie Huaisang asked, his voice slurred more.**

**Jiang Cheng swayed, “What?”**

**They both pretended to fall unconscious.**

More laughed at the pure ridiculousness of this.

**“Why is this important?” Jin Zixun demanded.**

**“You’re the one who offered Hanguang-Jun alcohol,” Jin Zixuan pointed out, “Perhaps Wei Wuxian is showing why that’s a bad idea.”**

**“Lan Wangji drank?” Nie Mingjue asked sharply.**

**“Wei Wuxian’s bad influence knows no bounds,” Lan Qiren crossed his arms.**

**“Is there a reason there’s a rule against drinking?” Jin Guangyao asked, hoping to draw Lan Xichen back into the moment.**

**His older sworn brother hummed, “I’m not quite sure what came first, the rule against drinking or our reaction to liquor.”**

**Nie Huaisang laughed, “I’m eager to see what kind of drunk you are.”**

**“So am I,” Lan Wangji replied.**

**“You don’t remember this?” Lan Xichen blinked.**

**“Not past the first drink.”**

**“Lan Zhan, you see they are too drunk to walk,” Wei Wuxian said, “What if you sit down with me? Let’s have a drink and talk.”**

**Lan Wangji just turned away.**

**“Lan Zhan!” Wei Wuxian called after him as the two boys on the bed started to get up.**

**“If you refuse to come with me, I will ask for help and force you to,” Lan Wangji threatened, as Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang pushed past him pretending like they were about to throw up.**

“Cowards!”

“Wouldn’t you retreat if it was Hanguang-Jun?”

“Wei Wuxian truly knows no fear.”

**While he was distracted, Wei Wuxian placed a talisman on his back, forcing him to freeze.**

**Wei Wuxian waved a hand in front of his face, “Lan Zhan?” Getting no reaction, he snapped his fingers, “Lan Zhan?” Another snap, “Lan Zhan?” He waved, and getting no reaction, turned and shut the doors. He sat down, “Lan Zhan, come here,” He ordered, “Sit and drink the wine.”**

**Lan Wangji did so.**

“What talisman is that?” Jin Guangshan wondered.

Even before Wei Wuxian discovered demonic cultivation, he created a talisman powerful enough to control the likes of Hanguang-Jun?

“Wei-xiong had a lot of experimental talismans,” Nie Huaisang answered, “I don’t know if he made more of that one, or if he even named it.” He fluttered his fan, “Seeing what we’ve seen now, I’d guess he was trying to see how a puppet would be made with our cultivation method.”

“What did it feel like?” Jin Guangshan followed up, staring at Hanguang-Jun.

“Floating,” The Second Jade answered, “If I concentrated, I could have broken it, but we were equal in cultivation.”

A pity it wasn’t of use to anyone in his Sect then. The weak weren’t worth the effort. Demonic cultivation strengthened its puppets. This only made regular people biddable, and those who served him were eager enough to follow his orders.

**Wei Wuxian got excited, “See, I am not fooling you. Doesn’t it taste great?” There was still no reaction, so he waved his hand in front of his face again, “Lan Zhan?” He sighed in disappointment, “Lan Zhan, you have thick skin. You won’t even blush.”**

**Suddenly, Lan Wangji fell forward, his head hitting the table.**

“What the fuck?” Jiang Wanyin swore.

Hanguang-Jun was that much of a lightweight?

No wonder the Lan Sect was so strict with alcohol if it left them so affected.

**Wei Wuxian looked on in horror, “Lan Zhan?” He prodded him, but he was truly unconscious and just moved to the side. He gently slapped his face, “Lan Zhan? Can you please go back to your room?” He shook him harder, “Please do not sleep here.”**

**With some effort, Wei Wuxian managed to move the unconscious Lan Wangji onto the bed. He sat down on the ground next to him, examining the jar, “I bet no one imagined that someone high and mighty like you would one day follow my lead.” He continued drinking, “Lan-er, call me Wei-gege.”**

**Lan Wangji, who appeared somewhat conscious now, obeyed, “Wei-gege.”**

This was enough to stop everyone from thinking of Sect Leader Jiang and Wen Qing.

Hanguang-Jun was a lightweight. He was still stone-faced, but there was a distinct disorder to his actions.

**Wei Wuxian laughed delightedly, then noticed something. He reached a hand out, and Lan Wangji flinched away, “What’s wrong?”**

**“Finally, some reactions,” He leaned on the bed, “Your forehead ribbon is tilted.”**

**It took a few seconds for his words to register, but when they did Lan Wangji sat up, “Tilted?” He immediately tried to fix it as though he could see it by looking up.**

Adorable. Lan Xichen fought back a grin.

Lan Qiren fought back the urge to go to the Burial Mounds and throttle Wei Wuxian.

“I can’t believe I missed this,” Nie Huaisang whispered.

**“Let me help,” Wei Wuxian reached out again.**

**His hand was slapped away, “Go away.”**

**Wei Wuxian settled back down on the floor, taking another drink as he watched the other continue to try and fix it, “It’s still not right,” He commented, reaching for a third time.**

**Lan Wangji he slapped the hand away a third time.**

**“What?” Wei Wuxian asked, “I am just trying to help you adjust it. Why are you so nervous?”**

**“The forehead ribbon is sacred,” Lan Wangji told him, “No one can touch it except for family and significant others.”**

**Wei Wuxian snorted, moving up onto the bed, “Significant others?”**

**“What are you laughing at?” Lan Wangji demanded.**

He was definitely more irritable as well, or perhaps clearer in expressing his irritation.

It wasn't as terrible as it could be. Lan Wangji watched himself with increasing embarrassment. If his verbal filter was gone, who knew what he ended up saying? Considering how their conversation in the Cold Springs went, he must have said something to change Wei Ying's view of him.

After this, Wei Ying was no less annoying, but there was less...provocation in his actions. He seemed more determined to be his friend than simply drawing a reaction from him.

**“I am laughing at the Lan Sect,” Wei Wuxian answered, “You have so many rules that are so rigid and pretentious. Women would not marry you. You are going to be alone forever.” He took another drink.**

**Lan Wangji looked away, “That's fine.”**

“Of course it is,” Su She commented.

It was no secret how alone Hanguang-Jun was. He didn't show an interest in courting anyone. He didn't have friends. The only company he kept was that of his brother and uncle. He didn't even spend time with his own disciples, preferring secluded meditation and training than anything in a group.

None of them could understand how one would prefer to be alone in such a manner.

Then again, from what they'd seen, he wasn't quite alone. He had Wei Wuxian.

**Wei Wuxian peered at him for the odd answer, “Hey, is every member of your clan that vapid?” He wondered, “Your father is as vapid as you. Your mother must be so bored.” He chuckled to himself at the teasing.**

**“I don't have a mother,” Lan Wangji revealed.**

Jin Guangyao heard Xichen's sharp intake of breath. He realized they'd never talked about Madame Lan. He knew she was dead, had been dead for a long time, but nothing else. The Lan were an insular group, not prone to rumor or gossip, but it was ridiculous to know nothing about the wife of a Sect Leader.

Then again, the former Sect Leader was in seclusion for all of Xichen's life. Absent fathers were one of the first topics of conversation between them.

Perhaps the matters were connected. If they were covering up some great scandal...

No, he wouldn't force Xichen to speak of it in public.

**“That's impossible,” Wei Wuxian argued immediately, “You can't be born out of thin air-” He cut himself off as he realized what the other meant by his words. He sobered, taking in the mournful demeanor of his companion. He let out a breath, “My parents**



**died when I was four. You may think I would remember things then.”**

**He sighed and shook his head, “But I don’t. The only thing I remember is being chased by wild dogs. I don’t remember what my parents looked like.” He let out another sad laugh, “But I recall a scene. I was riding on a donkey with my mother by my side. My father was right in front of us. It might be that my mother cracked a joke and my father laughed.”**

“That’s all?” Lan Qiren couldn’t help but ask.

“He spent two years on the streets,” Jiang Yanli answered, “It was traumatic enough for him to forget all of before.”

“Surely Jiang Fengmian told him more,” Otherwise his next actions would look terrible.

“A-Xian heard many stories of his father, as he was a servant of the Jiang Sect,” The new mother bowed her head, “Nobody at Lotus Pier knew her except Father, and he never spoke of her because my Mother all but forbid it.”

Everyone heard how Jiang Fengmian favored Wei Wuxian over his own son.

They also heard how Yu Ziyuan treated Wei Wuxian like a bastard, often lashing out as though his very existence was a slight to her honor. Lan Qiren could have easily guessed Jiang Fengmian, always one to avoid conflict, would choose to never speak of Cangse Sanren to avoid angering her further.

His next actions were terrible. Ignorance was no excuse for such cruelty. It was for the best that his nephews didn’t know about their mother. He didn’t need them to become anything like her. But Wei Wuxian? Who was already so much like her naturally?

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Wei Wuxian was a shameless troublemaker, but he didn’t deserve such cruelty from one who was supposed to instruct him.

“Rumors do more harm than good,” He pronounced, resigning himself to giving Wei Wuxian a chance.

“If it is any comfort, Teacher Lan,” Jiang Wanyin added, “I believe Xiao Xingchen was able to help him remember more.”

It wasn’t a comfort. What were the chances another student of Baoshan Sanren would descend from her mountain and meet the son of another student? Xiao Xingchen wasn’t much older than Wei Wuxian. What would he even know of Cangse Sanren?

**Wei Wuxian sighed again, “Lan Zhan, here’s to you.” He toasted, “No. Here’s to us. May we never forget what is worth remembering or remember what is best forgotten.” He tried to offer the jar to the other, “Bottoms up.” Then drank when he didn’t respond.**

This was what changed his mind about him?

Lan Wangji wished he remembered this. Maybe then they could have spoken more about their families. If there was anyone he could bring himself to speak of his mother too, it was Wei Ying. Then they could have understood each other better.

He would have known what he meant when he asked him to go back to Gusu.

**Lan Qiren returned from his travels the next morning, and met with Lan Xichen for tea. The young Sect Leader served it, then spoke, “Grandmaster, you must be exhausted from all the traveling. How did the cultivation conference go?”**

**“We met with Nie-zongzhu,” Lan Qiren answered, “As expected, the same demonic event has been happening in Qinghe. The same red cracks appeared on cultivator’s necks.”**

**Lan Xichen lowered his tea, “Have they found any clues?”**

**“Nie-zongzhu is looking into it.” Lan Qiren took a sip, “Is everything okay in Cloud Recesses?”**

**“Lately, the Wens have been quiet,” Lan Xichen answered, “However, a demonic event was witnessed on Biling Lake.”**

**“Tell me more about it.”**

**“I was just about to tell you,” Lan Xichen looked forward, “A few days ago, some students and I went to perform an exorcism on water ghosts at Biling Lake, yet we found that the spirits in the lake had been demonized and turned into a Waterborne Abyss. This has never happened before. Wei-gongzi suspected that it might have something to do with the snatched spirits.”**

**“Wei-gongzi?” Lan Qiren repeated, “Wei Wuxian.”**

**“He is the head disciple of Jiang-zongzhu.”**

There was never denying his skill, only his character.

But what was so wrong with being carefree and unrestrained in a Sect that valued freedom and forthrightness? What was so bad about a few harmless pranks? A night of celebratory drinking?

Doubts grew about the Yiling Patriarch. Yes, he was a demonic cultivator, but had they not once celebrated his cultivation? Was he not their ally in the Sunshot Campaign? So far, they saw the goodness of Wen Qing and the innocence of Wen Ning. They saw how those two were also victims of Wen Ruohan’s cruelty.

If they were mistreated by the Jin, then maybe they deserved whatever Wei Wuxian brought them.

**Before he could continue his defense, the memory switched to Wei Wuxian waking up to a disciple banging on his door. He rushed to his feet, but found too much evidence to**

**hide scattered around the room. Behind him, Lan Wangji rolled off the bed and onto the floor, sprawling indignantly. Wei Wuxian fought back a laugh and failed.**

Many laughed as well.

How could this become the Yiling Patriarch unless they were wrong about the Yiling Patriarch?

**It cut back to Lan Qiren, “Is he...?” He trailed off, “The son of...”**

**“Right,” Lan Xichen nodded, “He is the son of Wei Changze and Cangse Sanren.”**

**Lan Qiren huffed, “No wonder he has such mischievous ideas. Just like his mother.”**

Jiang Yanli perked up, “I always meant to ask you how well you knew Cangse Sanren, Teacher Lan.”

The elder grimaced, “We were...acquainted.”

“Perhaps you could tell me more about her,” She smiled.

It would be something nice for A-Xian after a year in exile. She wouldn't push him to return to Lotus Pier immediately. He didn't need the scrutiny or the responsibilities. Instead, she hoped he would go in search of Baoshan Sanren's mountain. He could visit whenever he wanted, and help whoever he encountered. He could be free.

A-Xian could find himself instead of being who he thought they needed him to be.

“Of course,” Lan Qiren inclined his head.

**Lan Xichen smiled, and hid it in his tea. A disciple interrupted, “Excuse me,” He came in and greeted the two.**

**“What is the problem?” Lan Xichen asked as he set down his tea.**

**“Wei Wuxian sneaked in some liquor,” The disciple reported, “Got drunk with a couple of students and got caught.” Lan Xichen smiled again, while Lan Qiren looked angry, “And Lan-er-gongzi was with them.”**

**Lan Xichen's amusement was instantly wiped away, “Wangji was with him?”**

**Lan Qiren hit the table, “How dare they!”**

Nie Mingjue snorted at Xichen's reaction. It served him right for pushing Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji together.

Meanwhile, he was surprised at how bold Huaisang was when he wasn't around. Sneaking around after curfew? Smuggling in snacks, which he knew they didn't offer in Cloud Recesses? Getting drunk? Engaging in play fighting with Jiang Wanyin and Wei Wuxian?

He thought his little brother respected Xichen and feared Lan Wangji too much to act out to the point of being punished.

Maybe there was more to him than a cowardly weakling. Maybe Wei Wuxian didn't trick him onto the quest for Yin Iron.

**It skipped forward to the punishment. Lan Xichen glanced at his uncle, who was staring forward determinedly. Lan Wangji walked in first and knelt before him, "I am at fault. Shufu, Zewu-Jun, I shall be punished."**

**Wei Wuxian, followed by Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang, also knelt, "Grandmaster, Zewu-Jun," Wei Wuxian pleaded, "It is true that we disobeyed the rules and got drunk, but Lan Zhan, he is not-"**

**"Nonsense!" Lan Qiren snapped, "Wei Wuxian! Your confinement as punishment has not even ended, yet here you are, causing trouble again." Wei Wuxian bit his lip to refrain from speaking, "How far do you want to take this? Are you trying to ruin Cloud Recesses? Do not think that just because your mother is Cangse..."**

**Wei Wuxian gasped and looked up, "Grandmaster. Did you know my mother?"**

**Lan Qiren wouldn't look at him.**

**Wei Wuxian tried again, "Grandmaster-"**

**"Shut up," Lan Qiren interrupted again.**

**"How cruel," Jin Guangyao frowned.**

**"I assumed he knew his parents," Lan Qiren spoke slowly, "If he is indeed innocent, I will seek to rectify the matter."**

Still, the hurt look in Wei Wuxian's eyes as he fell silent stirred something in his heart. At least he knew his mother. He spent most of his life with her. He would never forget her beauty and wit. He could look in the mirror and pinpoint what he inherited from her, and what he took from his father.

Why was Wei Wuxian so good when everyone treated him terribly? If Lan Qiren hurt him, and then he became the most powerful cultivator alive, he would have sought revenge. He would have killed anyone who called him a bastard or dismissed him as a servant.

That he'd done nothing since going into the Burial Mounds only proved how annoyingly good he was.

**"Wangji," Lan Xichen spoke, "Wei-gongzi is not a member of the Lan Sect, but you are, and you're fully aware of the rules."**

**"I recognize the mistake that has been made," Lan Wangji replied.**

**“Zewu-Jun,” Wei Wuxian exclaimed, “Zewu-Jun! It was all on me. I made him drink the liquor. It was against his will.”**

**“I recognize the mistake and shall be punished,” Lan Wangji contradicted.**

**Wei Wuxian turned to him, “What is wrong with you? Why are you asking for punishment?”**

**“You should have told him you could have broken his control,” Jiang Cheng snapped.**

Wei Wuxian didn’t need more things to unnecessarily blame himself for.

“I know.”

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Qiren looked over their heads, “As the head of the group, you shall be hit by the bastinado 300 times.” His eyes widened as his friends gaped behind him, “The same punishment goes to Lan Zhan. The rest shall be hit 50 times. Let this be a warning.”**

**“Three hundred times?” Wei Wuxian stammered out, “Those bastinados are monstrous! Am I going to survive this?”**

**“Do it,” Lan Qiren ordered.**

**Nie Huaisang collapsed on the first strike. Wei Wuxian fell forward, but saw Lan Wangji taking the strikes without flinching. He forced himself back upright and stared forward, determined to take the same punishment in the same way.**

People muttered around the room. The physical pain was obviously nothing to Wei Wuxian, nor was the humiliation of a public punishment.

But the unintentional cruelty from the Lan head family was impossible to ignore.

Lan Xichen allowed Wei Wuxian to be punished harsher than the other two, even though it looked like all three were equal and willing participants. Yes, Wei Wuxian brought the alcohol in, but the excessive noise which drew Hanguang-Jun’s attention was instigated by Nie Huaisang, and the play fighting by Jiang Wanyin.

Lan Qiren dangled information about an orphan boy’s parents in front of him and refused to share it. He didn’t know the boy didn’t know the same, but unintentional cruelty didn’t make it less cruel. Few could ignore how desperate then disparaged Wei Wuxian looked right before his punishment.

Lan Wangji didn’t explain why he was accepting the same punishment, leaving Wei Wuxian to believe it was all his fault. He tried to get him out of it, to save who he perceived as innocent from an unjust punishment.

**It skipped to the Jiang siblings walking with Wei Wuxian between them. Jiang Yanli said softly, “A-Cheng, you are close to A-Xian and have always disciplined him. Why did you fool around with him last night?”**

**“A-Jie,” Jiang Cheng rubbed his back, “Can we not talk about it anymore? The fact that I got fifty hits, please keep it a secret from our parents.”**

**“The three hundred hits for me should also be kept secret,” Wei Wuxian added.**

**“You caused everything!” Jiang Cheng stated.**

**“But no one forced you to drink the Emperor’s Smile,” Wei Wuxian argued.**

**“That’s enough,” Jiang Yanli interjected, “Do you two want to continue to fight?”**

**Wei Wuxian groaned in pain, “Shijie, it hurts everywhere.”**

**“Let it be a lesson for you,” Jiang Yanli replied, but softened, “Just endure it. Wait until the class ends, I will make you danggui soup.”**

**“Shijie,” He trudged on, “I should have more protein to promote rapid healing.”**

**“Danggui soup with lamb should do the trick.” Jiang Cheng smiled.**

**“You two,” She scolded half-heartedly.**

Punishment didn’t deter him.

Madame Jin sighed. Perhaps he was too accustomed to punishment for a bastinado to have much effect.

She glanced at her daughter-in-law and grandson. She always wondered what she saw in the ill-behaved son of a servant, but it was so clear now that for all the trouble he brought, he brought equal happiness.

**Then they spotted Lan Xichen walking towards them. They greeted them as well as they were able.**

**“Zewu-Jun, did I break the rules again?” Wei Wuxian asked hesitantly.**

**“You guys indeed went overboard last night,” Lan Xichen said, “Shufu may be a bit harsh, and so is the punishment. The bastinado is quite heavy. It will probably take weeks for the wounds on your back to heal.”**

**“Ah,” Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened, his brother looking at him in concern, “Weeks? That’s a long time.”**

**“Let me point you to a place to go to heal a bit faster so you won’t be behind in your studies,” Lan Xichen smiled.**

**Jiang Yanli bowed, “Thank you for the support, Zewu-Jun.”**

**“Zewu-Jun,” Wei Wuxian stopped him before he could lead the way, “My mother…”**

**“Oh, Wei-gongzi,” He looked back, “Back in the day, Cangse Sanren was classmates with Shufu. Shufu’s behavior was strictly mannered and your mother...” He smiled, “How should I say this? She was just like you.” Jiang Cheng fought back a laugh, “I hope you do not hold a grudge against Shufu. It is true that he was being extra harsh on you.”**

**He slightly smiled again, “It was just...” He turned and took a few steps away, “Well, let’s just say it was difficult for him to keep his beard looking good back then.”**

“So you told Zewu-Jun about Cangse Sanren, but not her own son?” Jin Guangyao felt his distaste for Lan Qiren grow.

The esteemed elder didn’t answer.

**The scene cut away to Wen Qing reporting to Wen Ruohan. She informed him of the incident at Biling Lake. She closed her eyes after the note finished burning. When she opened them, she realized, “The Yin Iron is in the water.”**

It seemed so obvious once she pointed it out.

**It went back to Wei Wuxian, who was cheerfully making his way down the steps. Between the bamboo shoots, he spotted Lan Wangji bathing in a cold spring.**

Nie Mingjue couldn’t help it. He laughed, “Xichen, you are so lucky we became friends easily.”

It was hilarious when he manipulated the hunting party so Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji shared a room. This was a level of devious he never thought Xichen could stoop to. This was Huaisang level shenanigans. He sent Wei Wuxian to his brother while he was bathing in the Cold Springs. He didn’t even warn said brother of the incoming visitor.

“What if he was naked?” His little brother asked through his laughter.

“I trusted Wei Wuxian to not be quiet,” Xichen said with a straight face, but he could see the amusement radiating off him. It was almost as obvious as the fury radiating from his uncle.

“You really threw them together,” Jiang Wanyin commented bitterly.

“I had hoped Wei Wuxian would be a good influence,” His best friend’s eyes narrowed slightly.

The Jiang Sect Leader scoffed, “I’m sure we’ll see who dragged who down.”

**Wei Wuxian started running down the steps, “Lan Zhan!” He sped up, calling out again, “Lan Zhan!”**

**Lan Wangji started putting his clothes back on as he rounded the final corner, “Lan Zhan,” He panted, leaning on the nearest bamboo shoot, “How come you never told me about a place like this?” He crossed his arms, “Why didn’t you share it with me? That’s not how a good friend should act.”**

**“How did you get in?” Lan Wangji demanded.**

**He shrugged, “Zewu-Jun let me in.”**

“Must we watch this?” Jin Zixuan asked, kindly ignoring the tension between his brother-in-law and his half-brother’s sworn brother.

Yes, Lan Wangji put his clothes back on, but he was the one with shame. Wei Wuxian definitely would not care about getting naked in front of others.

“We must,” Nie Huaisang grinned, “After all, this is when they disappeared.”

“Nothing inappropriate happened,” Lan Wangji repeated.

“Of course,” The small man’s fan fluttered dismissively, “Of course.”

His tone suggested he didn’t believe him. Which everyone in the crowd picked up on and began whispering about. He shot a warning look at him. The Nie Sect wasn’t a place for politics, so maybe he didn’t realize how much power his words held. But if he didn’t shut up he was going to ruin Hanguang-Jun’s reputation, which would make everything harder.

**Wei Wuxian laughed, then kicked off his shoes and pulled off his socks. He stepped in slowly, “This is cold,” He laughed, then made his way further in, “It’s really cold.” He shuffled closer to Lan Wangji, “Bone-chilling.” He rubbed at his arms, “It’s freezing.”**

**“Stop fumbling,” Lan Wangji scolded.**

**“I know,” He replied, “But the spring is freezing cold. If I do not move around, my blood will freeze, so will my extremities.” He shivered, then moved closer again, “Lan Zhan.”**

**Lan Wangji stepped away.**

**He frowned, “Lan Zhan. Hey, you...alright. You are somewhat rigid, pedantic, depressing, and a little bit boring and I did not think too highly of you at the beginning. But I changed my mind after our fights ended in a draw.” He tapped his chest, “You are one of the people I approve of and I want to be friends with you.”**

**“That won’t be necessary,” Lan Wangji didn’t look at him.**

**He sighed in annoyance, “You are no fun. Let me share something with you.” His hands went to his belt, “A lot of benefits come with being my friend.” He started to undo it.**

People choked again on their drinks and air.

“Did the Yiling Patriarch just proposition Hanguang-Jun?”

“It certainly sounds like he is.”

“Is the Yiling Patriarch a cutsleeve?”



Nie Huaisang laughed loudly, “Wei-xiong just appreciates beauty in any form.”

“Hanguang-Jun is beautiful.”

“He must be used to such propositions.”

“Yes, yes, that is why he didn’t respond.”

**This drew Lan Wangji’s attention, “What are you doing?”**

**“Getting undressed to start properly healing,” Wei Wuxian explained with a cheery little laugh, fumbling with his belt. Lan Wangji started walking away, and he called after him, “Please do not leave me here. I will stop undressing.”**

**He fixed his belt, “Lan Zhan, have you ever been to Yunmeng? There are lots of fun things to do there. There’s great food. How about this?” He waved his sword about, “If you ever visit the Lotus Pier, I will pick lotus for you, the seedpod along with the water chestnuts.”**

**“Never,” Lan Wangji replied.**

**“Alright,” Wei Wuxian placed his hands on his hips, “Let me tell you a big secret.” He made his way closer, “There are a lot of cuties in Yunmeng, pretty ladies.” He laughed.**

**“See, ladies! He must not be a cutsleeve.”**

**“How could you doubt he is a womanizer?”**

They laughed at themselves for their quick assumptions. The rumors couldn’t be so wrong as to completely misinterpret the sexuality of the most talked about man in the cultivation world, could it? Wei Wuxian just acted like he was flirting to get a reaction out of the other. He needed to throw the heaviest stones to put a crack in that mask.

Lan Xichen was relieved no one could tell Wangji was embarrassed, not insulted.

If Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes any harder they would fall out.

**Wei Wuxian then turned, noticing a strange bubbling in the water, and growing serious, “Lan Zhan. Do you feel something strange happening?”**

**He turned, but only managed a startled, “Lan Zhan!” Before he was pulled underwater.**

**Lan Wangji turned, but only had time to grab his sword before he was also pulled down.**

**“That’s what happened?” Jin Zixuan wondered.**

**“Good thing they weren’t naked,” Nie Huaisang commented lightly.**

“But what could sneak up on them?”

**They both tumbled into a cave soaking wet. Wei Wuxian coughed and leaned on the wall, while Lan Wangji looked around. Wei Wuxian panted, “Lan Zhan, what is this place? Why is there a swirling tunnel beneath the Cold Spring?” They wandered further into the cave, “What is this place? It’s so weird. The water is extremely cold but it’s not frozen.”**

**The tunnel widened into an actual cavern. A white guqin laid on a white table on an altar. Lan Wangji moved towards it, Wei Wuxian close behind, “Lan Zhan, wait up!”**

**As soon as Wei Wuxian placed a foot on one of the steps, a wave of spiritual energy was released from the guqin. It passed through Lan Wangji without touching him, but Wei Wuxian was thrown back. He floundered and got up, “What is this thing?” He demanded.**

“The Cold Spring Cave,” Lan Xichen answered, “Only accessible to Lan Sect members.”

“So how did Wei Wuxian survive?” Jin Guangyao inquired.

He blinked, “I’m...not sure.”

It was one thing to break through wards. It was another to trick an ancient enchantment into believing one was part of their lineage. It meant no place was safe from his tricks, no matter how impenetrable they were thought to be.

It meant he was more dangerous than they already thought.

**Lan Wangji thought about it, then answered, “Chord Assassination Technique.”**

**“The Chord Assassination Technique?” He echoed, “Isn’t that a peculiar trick of your clan?” Another wave of energy fired at him, and he fell flat to avoid it, “What’s happening?” He floundered, “Why are they all coming for me?”**

**“ *The engraving on this guqin is the Lan Sect’s seal,* ” Lan Wangji noted in his head, “It will not attack me, probably because it senses that I am a member of the Lan Sect.” Another attack, but this time Lan Wangji blocked it with his sword and dispersed it.**

Breaths of relief were exhaled around the room.

Of course Hanguang-Jun would be powerful enough to protect him from such attacks. They should have guessed he was the reason the two of them survived.

**Wei Wuxian slowly relaxed, and noticed a small warren of bunnies hopping around. Lan Wangji noticed them as well, “How come these rabbits are wearing the Lan forehead ribbon?”**

**“ *I heard that every member of the Lan Sect wears a forehead ribbon starting from their childhood. The forehead ribbon recognizes the owner and has a special power,* ” Wei Wuxian thought, “ *How come the rabbits wear the forehead ribbon as well?* ” He**

**pondered, “Power...forehead ribbon,” He gasped, “Lan Zhan, your ribbon. Hand over your ribbon.”**

**Lan Wangji glanced at him, but hesitated.**

Was Wei Wuxian’s memory so short?

Only family members and significant others could touch their sacred forehead ribbons. Wei Wuxian wasn’t even Hanguang-Jun’s friend yet.

**Wei Wuxian insisted, “Hurry.”**

**Lan Wangji hurried to his side, removing his forehead ribbon in one smooth motion. He wrapped one end around his wrist, and the other around Wei Wuxian’s, then pulled it taut.**

All the Lan Sect cultivators in the room tensed, their eyes darting to a furious Lan Qiren.

Su She couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

They’d heard from Hanguang-Jun himself about the sacredness of the forehead ribbon.

Yes, there were special circumstances, but Wei Wuxian already proved he could survive the attack, and Hanguang-Jun showed it could be deflected by his spiritual weapon. There was no need for more action once that was proven. It was far more sensible for Hanguang-Jun to attempt to control the guqin causing harm than to share his ribbon.

Nie Huaisang’s fan clattered to the ground as he beamed, “Belated congratulations on your betrothal, Hanguang-Jun!”

“Huaisang!”

All hell broke loose.

## Chapter End Notes

The Naked Time is literally one of my favorite Star Trek TOS episodes. 10/10 would recommend. I won't expand on why I chose it for the title unless someone actually cares.

Once again, thank you for all your kind comments!

# The Old Foreshadows The New

## Chapter Summary

Does anyone else love the Yin Iron as a plot device?

## Chapter Notes

Use your imagination for the insults being shouted at the beginning. I tried for a hot second but got uncomfortable so I stopped.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

This wasn't a joke.

Even if the idea of Lan Wangji, of all people, having an illicit affair was ridiculous and watching Lan Qiren spit blood then collapse dramatically on the disciples behind him was.

The cultivation world was upset.

Nie Mingjue grabbed his brother, forcing him to be silent before he could say anything more incriminating. This wasn't like the forbidden romance between Jiang Wanyin and Wen Qing. This wasn't some fanciful story of star-crossed lovers that could be resolved by a real explanation. Jiang Wanyin and Wen Qing had a chance, if she truly helped their side.

No matter what, Wei Wuxian was a demonic cultivator. As unjust as it might seem to Huaisang, it was more than enough for most of the world to condemn him. He would never stop being dangerous.

This was only buying him time until the next accusation of evil, until his next experimentation crossed another line.

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji weren't star-crossed. They were doomed.

“Da-ge-”

“Don't, Huaisang.” He shot a glare at Jin Guangyao, “Do something.”

As annoying as his lying and manipulations were, Xichen needed it now.

~

Under any other circumstances, Jin Guangyao would have ignored his eldest sworn brother or feigned inability. This chaos, this defamation of character, was exactly what his father hoped for and a part of him didn't want to disappoint him. Besides, this was what the world always wanted, to see those in power fall in disgrace so they might have the chance to replace them.

Through the shouting of irate people, he saw how terribly sad Er-ge was.

He didn't personally care about Lan Wangji, but his pain was his brother's pain. He could never intentionally cause Er-ge harm.

Jin Guangyao rose from his seat, "Esteemed guests, calm yourselves. Let's be reasonable."

"Reasonable?" Jin Zixun raised his voice, "Hanguang-Jun has disgraced himself with the Yiling Patriarch!"

"Hanguang-Jun has done nothing but admit his devotion to Wei Wuxian," He corrected, dropping some of his politeness, "I believe we can all agree Wei Wuxian is not the same as the Yiling Patriarch, can we not?"

"We can," Nie Mingjue agreed, and a part of him preened at his words.

"Of course we can," Su She sent him an odd look, but supported him nonetheless, "We are all aware of how resentful energy corrupts the mind. This Wei Wuxian still does not know of the Yin Iron!" He got nods of agreement from some of the other minor Sect leaders, "The worst we can say is Hanguang-Jun is a cutsleeve, but it's not like any of us expected him to marry anyways."

There was the sly insult he was waiting for. There were worse things to be than a cutsleeve. If it were anyone other than Wei Wuxian, it likely wouldn't have impacted his reputation at all.

"I thought Lan only loved once," Sect Leader Yao frowned, "Who's to say he is not still in love with the Yiling Patriarch?"

"His presence here says he isn't," Jin Guangyao lied, "Just as Jiang-zongzhu chose his duty over his heart, Hanguang-Jun stands with his brother, not his love. He sits with his Sect, here, in Koi Tower, not with the Wen in the Burial Mounds. Even if he were still in love, it is obviously not enough for him to act on it."

"Is it really love if it doesn't last when the other is at their worst?" Sect Leader Jiang asked bitterly.

Jin Guangyao nodded in agreement, "Have we heard Hanguang-Jun speak in the Yiling Patriarch's defense? Has he thrown aside his sword and joined him on the heretic path? No, because he is everything his reputation says he is. If he were truly in love with the Yiling Patriarch, why has he done nothing to help him?"

His words were cruel, but hurt pride was easier to fix than a damaged reputation.

Hanguang-Jun stiffened, his eyes flaring with obvious anger. Er-ge reached out to stop him. For a moment, Jin Guangyao thought it wouldn't work, that Hanguang-Jun would say

something to put him beyond saving. But Er-ge's eyes pleaded for restraint and patience. If there was one thing the Lan were good at, it was being restrained and patient.

To his surprise, Madam Jin spoke up, "We can forgive Hanguang-Jun a youthful fancy, can't we? After all, no one like Wei Wuxian has ever gone to the Cloud Recesses before."

Jin Guangyao was highly aware Hanguang-Jun was still hopelessly in love with Wei Wuxian. He was sure everyone else of importance from the major Sects was also aware, with the exception of his father. He exchanged a long look with Da-ge, who nodded in thanks. He'd bought them time. He gave them until Wei Wuxian returned from his disappearance a demonic cultivator.

"Love doesn't last long," Madam Jin continued, "When it is unrequited."

~

Jiang Yanli glanced sharply at her mother-in-law as she continued to soothe her infant son. Jin Ling had been behaving so well up until all the shouting began. She wished desperately to comment upon the situation, say something in support of A-Xian, but it was all she could do to keep her child from screaming his lungs out.

"Can we trust these memories?" Jin Zixun demanded, "If Hanguang-Jun is in love with him-"

"This wasn't Hanguang-Jun's idea," Her husband interjected, "This was Nie Huaisang's."

"I'm not in love with anyone," Nie Huaisang retrieved his fan, "I just want to know what happened. Besides..." His eyes sharpened, "I owe him a debt. He saved Da-ge's life at Nightless City...the least I can do is watch what he chose to share."

It was a not so subtle reminder that A-Xian saved them all.

"He killed members of my Sect," Sect Leader Ouyang narrowed his eyes.

"As many as he saved during the Sunshot Campaign?" Jin Guangyao wondered.

"Lives can't be weighed like that!" Sect Leader Yao thundered.

"Well if they can't," Her husband's half-brother approached the orb, "Please give me some warning before you condemn me for the lives I took to get close to Wen Ruohan." He picked up the dormant device, his eyes closing in concentration. After a few seconds, a vivid green joined the other colors in their swirl, more similar to Nie Huaisang's than his half-brother's.

"Sometimes to achieve great things, sacrifices need to be made," The youngest of the Venerated Triad tossed the orb to the oldest, "I can see now how much Wei Wuxian must have given up to become the Yiling Patriarch. If he did so to save us all, as I did, then perhaps he needs rehabilitation, not condemnation."

She wished she was closer to Jin Guangyao. He had such a way with words. He subtly commanded any room he walked into. It made her husband and mother-in-law uncomfortable. Sensing that, Jin Guangyao rejected her every attempt at socializing with

him. He really did remind her of A-Xian sometimes. He was so eager to help, to prove he deserved his place.

He wanted their love so desperately, and she wished to give it. Sadly, she wasn't the person he wanted it from.

"You may have a point," Jin Guangshan mused.

"I would be more than willing to help my little brother," She spoke up, A-Ling fussing only a little in her arms.

She wasn't completely blind. She knew her father-in-law wanted to control A-Xian. Just as he dangled his approval before Jin Guangyao, he watched this projection looking for something A-Xian wanted enough to obey him. Hanguang-Jun wanted to save her little brother, but it was beyond his power.

There were subtle ways to influence Jin Guangshan. His eyes darkened with approval at her words.

"If he is worthy of such effort," Jin Zixun muttered, but fell silent.

There were no more words spoken of Hanguang-Jun's betrothal. Jin Guangyao convinced everyone else his love died when A-Xian turned to demonic cultivation. Those who persisted in discrediting Hanguang-Jun could not speak without insulting Jin Guangyao, which was foolish even if both of his sworn brothers weren't present.

Nie Mingjue adding his memories was all they needed to continue. His support was incontestable.

**The attacks stopped, and together, they approached the altar.**

Nie Huaisang fluttered his fan, keeping his thought that this was appearing more like a wedding than an engagement to himself.

He already got what he wanted.

His brother was so firm in his beliefs. It was why he got along with Er-ge so well. The Lan Sect rules were carved in stone. They were unchanging. Er-ge himself wasn't so rigid, but he was honest and forthright, which was enough for his brother. Da-ge could forgive keeping secrets, but he had his own ideas of righteous and just behavior.

San-ge didn't fit that. San-ge lied as easily as he breathed. He put on an act in front of everyone.

But sometimes lying and manipulation could accomplish more than straightforward action, so he created a situation to prove that. If there was anyone Da-ge would break his own rules for, it was Er-ge.

**"I want to take a closer look and see what it is," Wei Wuxian said, "It won't allow strangers to get near it." He reached down a hand to touch it.**

**Lan Wangji stopped him with his sword, “Do not touch it. This guqin is a rare masterpiece and it is enhanced by power. It will attack anyone who is not a member of the Lan Sect. It must belong to an ancestor of the Lan Clan.”**

**Wei Wuxian nudged him, “I just want to take a look, I swear not to touch it.”**

**He tried again and was blocked again, “Stop it. Be respectful to the heirloom.”**

**“How can I get a good look without picking it up?” Wei Wuxian complained.**

**“I have my way,” Lan Wangji tugged him to the other side.**

It was easier to see Wei Wuxian as someone else entirely from the Yiling Patriarch.

They could understand why Hanguang-Jun would love Wei Wuxian. He was bright, cheerful, funny, his opposite in personality but equal in cultivation. For all that he acted like Wei Wuxian annoyed him, it was an act. It was obvious to see now all the times he was just embarrassed.

As Madame Jin said, he was young, enraptured by the free spirit he’d never encountered before. It would die as Wei Wuxian changed.

After all, he was Hanguang-Jun. He was everything a cultivator aspired to be. There was no way he was in love with the Yiling Patriarch.

**Lan Wangji took the seat behind the instrument and placed his hands in position to play. Wei Wuxian sat next to it as he played the opening to Inquiry. He withdrew after a moment.**

**“Ask the spirit,” Wei Wuxian encouraged, “I have heard of the sorcerous act, a unique skill that only the Lan can execute. Talking with the deceased through strings.” Lan Wangji glared at him, and he stood up with a nervous laugh, dusting the place where he’d been sitting.**

**As soon as he was standing, there was a response on the guqin. Lan Wangji stared down, “It’s her.”**

**“Who is it?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

Lan Yi.

Lan Qiren forced himself to calm down. His Sect couldn’t afford to lose more face, especially when it was revealed Wangji did not, in fact, stop loving Wei Wuxian, even after demonic cultivation ruined him.

He would assign a fitting punishment for Wangji’s indecency later. How dare he bind himself to Wei Wuxian? How dare he bring someone like that into their Sect, their family? Without consulting him or any other? He didn’t even ask for permission, he just performed the ancient ceremony. Wei Wuxian didn’t even understand the significance!



He never stood a chance. Wangji was doomed to repeat all his father's mistakes.

Soon, Xichen would have to make the same choice as Jiang Wanyin. It would become impossible to protect his brother and uphold the values of their Sect, as was expected of his position. It might be expected of them to expel Wangji.

Lan Qiren wasn't sure what he would do if they needed to.

**Suddenly, other voices could be heard, "The QishanWen. The GusuLan. The YunmengJiang. The LanlingJin." The two of them moved between the instrument and the voices. They drew their swords, "The QingheNie. Kill the gentry and destroy the Yin Iron. Kill the gentry and destroy the Yin Iron."**

**"What are those voices?" Wei Wuxian asked as the chant continued.**

**"I do not know," Lan Wangji answered, "Be careful."**

**"Xue Chonghai, hand the Yin Iron over!" Someone demanded.**

**"It sounds like the Five Sects," Wei Wuxian commented, "They were trying to eliminate a certain faction. Yin Iron? What is that?" He looked towards his companion.**

**"I have never heard of it," Lan Wangji confessed.**

It reminded too many of the Sunshot Campaign.

The Sects came together to fight against the one who abused the Yin Iron.

All lingering discussion of Hanguang-Jun's love life faded, everyone realizing this was it. This was the moment Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun were informed of the Yin Iron. This was the beginning of the Yiling Patriarch.

**As the chanting faded, they sheathed their weapons.**

**"The Yin Iron is cursed, not worth mentioning," A new voice said. They turned together to see a woman approaching the guqin. She sat down behind it.**

**"Lan Yi," Lan Xichen provided to the audience.**

The Lan disciples whispered to each other. How lucky for Hanguang-Jun! He got to meet one of their esteemed ancestors in person! Lan Yi was well-known as the only female Lan Sect Leader. She was also the most innovative. Chord Assassination was only one of her many creations.

Then she disappeared.

If any of them had been asked who Lan Yi would appear for, they would have chosen Lan Xichen over Lan Wangji. Zewu-Jun was strict, but he was understanding. It was Hanguang-Jun who appeared uncompromising.

Now, knowing how Lan Wangji was in love with YunmengJiang's head disciple, it seemed fitting for her to watch over their union. Lan Yi would have seen Wei Wuxian as similar to herself. She would have fostered his creative spirit, encouraged him to challenge and strengthen their rules. She would make him feel less like an outsider in the Sect.

It was as much a pity as it was a surprise. None of them expected Lan Wangji to ever find love...

**The scene cut away to Lan Xichen and Lan Qiren, "Shufu, it's possible that Wangji and Wei Wuxian are fine and that nothing happened. I have sent people to look for them."**

**"Wangji has always been diligent since he was a boy," He stared out into the distance, "He would never fool around like Wei Ying." Lan Xichen nodded, "Yet now, both of them disappeared in the Cold Spring. I am worried that..."**

**"Shufu, what worries you?" Lan Xichen asked.**

**Lan Qiren breathed deeply, "A storm is coming."**

"They haven't been gone that long," Nie Mingjue frowned.

"Time passed differently," Lan Wangji answered.

"Like a dream," Nie Huaisang murmured.

**It shifted to Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli searching the back hills. Jiang Yanli stumbled, and her brother looked to her with concern, "A-Jie, you stay here and take a break. I will bring some help and look over there." He led her towards some rocks and helped her sit down. Then he marched off.**

**"A-Cheng," Jiang Yanli panted, "Please find them."**

**"Be assured, A-Jie," Her brother didn't turn back, "I will find him and break his legs."**

**She laughed.**

**After a few minutes alone, she continued searching, but slipped on some rocks. She managed to fall into Jin Zixuan's arms, and they had a moment of eye contact before they both separated.**

**"Watch out, Jiang-guniang," He advised, then went back to his disciples.**

Jin Zixuan blushed at his own awkwardness. This wasn't a competition, but he already felt like he was failing. Jiang Wanyin had already bought Wen Qing a comb. Lan Wangji literally tied himself to Wei Wuxian.

Would they have married if the war hadn't started? Would an alliance with the Jin even have mattered if the Jiang were already allied with Wen and Lan? Maybe his fight with Wei Wuxian wouldn't have been needed to dissolve their betrothal.

**It cut back to the cave. Lan Wangji knelt, “Master Lan Yi,” He bowed, “I am Lan Zhan, a descendent from the Lan Clan.”**

**Wei Wuxian was shocked, “So, she is the one? The only female clan leader of the GusuLan, who created the Chord Assassination Technique, Lan Yi.” Lan Wangji tugged on their joined wrists, reminding him of propriety. He bowed, “I am Wei Ying, a disciple from the Jiang Sect.” He bowed, “Master Lan Yi.”**

“Why does this feel like a marriage?” Jiang Cheng asked bitterly.

“Because it is,” Nie Huaisang unhelpfully answered, causing another bout of whispering to flood the room, “Belated congratulations again, Hanguang-Jun.”

Lan Wangji just nodded.

Because he couldn’t be bothered to speak. He didn’t tell Wei Wuxian why he deserved to be beaten with the rest of them. He didn’t explain the significance of binding them with the ribbon. He didn’t tell Wei Wuxian he loved him. He didn’t speak up for him beyond a few words when the Sects turned against him.

Neither did he, but Wei Wuxian knew they were still family.

Like hell would he allow the Jin Sect or the Lan Sect to house him in his recovery. He was coming back to Lotus Pier when this was all over.

Even if he was married to Hanguang-Jun.

**She picked up a rabbit and petted it as they rose. Wei Wuxian smiled, “Master Lan Yi, so these rabbits with headbands were raised by you.”**

**“They were here to keep me company,” She said, “But my energy has been fading away throughout the years. They are too fond of playing and thus often come out.”**

**“Master Lan Yi,” Lan Wangji spoke, “The rumor was that you had passed away years ago. How come?”**

**“It must have something to do with the Yin Iron,” Wei Wuxian deduced.**

**She looked up at him and sighed, “It was my biggest mistake in my lifetime. And I paid the price with all my power. I kept the Yin Iron in confinement.” She held out a hand, and the Yin Iron shard materialized.**

An untold tragedy. A secret known only to the inner family of the Lan Sect for over a century.

Hanguang-Jun being married to Wei Wuxian could never compare.

What was loving a demonic cultivator compared to a past Sect Leader attempting demonic cultivation? And a former Sect Leader of the righteous Lan Sect at that?

The two boys exchanged looks, **“Master Lan Yi,” Wei Wuxian started, “What is the Yin Iron, and where are the shouting and pounding noises coming from?”**

**“The seal is beginning to crack as the power gets weaker,” She looked sad, “My energy is weakening and here you are. It may be destined.”**

Destiny?

Lan Xichen closed his eyes. This could not be their destiny.

Destiny implied this was unavoidable. It meant everything that had happened was inevitable. And maybe it was. With the release of the Yin Iron, tragedies were going to happen.

Why did his brother have to be at the center of it?

**“Master Lan Yi?” Wei Wuxian prompted.**

**“Hundreds of years ago, when the Yin Iron was not in fragments and still whole...” She trailed off, “The Yiling Burial Mounds back then was a celestial land and Xue Chonghai was the most powerful cultivator. Hundreds of years have passed, still, nobody knows why someone like Xue Chonghai, who had everything, would use the Yin Iron to absorb grievance and resentment and use living people as sacrifices.”**

Power.

What other reason was there? Just as Wen Ruohan craved power so he could control the cultivation world, Xue Chonghai must have had a similar thought to Wei Wuxian. After all, if demonic cultivation could be used without harming the user, there was more resentment in their surroundings than could ever be harnessed in their golden cores.

Terrible things were always done for the sake of power and vainglory.

The cultivation world was a competitive one. Everyone strove to rank higher than others. It was inevitable for someone to cheat.

**She paused for a moment, “He controlled an ancient monster, the Xuanwu of Slaughter. Blood was shed. Lives were taken. It was a great tragedy.”**

**“So the Five Sects united,” Wei Wuxian deduced, “They killed Xue Chonghai.”**

**“Wei-gongzi, you are as smart as I expected,” Lan Yi complimented, “Xue Chonghai was executed and the Xuanwu was put down. Dead bodies were everywhere. And Yiling, this once celestial land, became a massive burial ground.”**

No one missed the irony of Xue Chonghai’s palace being the current residence of the Yiling Patriarch.

Nor did they miss the implication that to stop the Yiling Patriarch, they would likely create another Burial Mound. If he were truly evil, how could they hope to stop him? What would a siege cost them?

**“Master Lan Yi,” Lan Wangji asked, “What happened to the Yin Iron after that?”**

**“The Yin Iron had snatched and absorbed too many living spirits, their grievances were too heavy to be dissipated.” She answered.**

**“Snatching spirits?” Wei Wuxian repeated.**

**Both Lans looked at him, the woman replying, “That is right. The Yin Iron was a rare treasure that was grown naturally. It was able to absorb energy from the universe. Yet Xue Chonghai fed it with living spirits, even cultivators. So the Yin Iron was filled with grievances and resentment. The change was irreversible.”**

**“Later on, the Five Sects decided to suppress it, and thus broke the Yin Iron into pieces and placed it in different locations that are full of good energy,” She continued, “To avoid anyone following the same fate, the Five Sects made an agreement and never spoke of the Yin Iron again.”**

An agreement that was now irrelevant, as all heard of the Yin Iron’s power.

Its origins were a surprise, but a few took comfort in it. If Xue Chonghai could be forgotten in time, along with the Xue Sect, then so would Wen Ruohan and the Wen Sect.

**“Do you think Xue Chonghai is an ancestor of Xue Yang?” Someone wondered.**

It would explain how he knew of the Yin Iron when he was not tied to a major Sect. It also proved the Jin’s persecution of anyone involved with the Yin Iron was righteous. Xue Chonghai was defeated centuries ago, yet Xue Yang only arose recently to commit atrocities. Would it be the same with the Wen Sect? If they let the survivors be, would they one day rise again?

**“With all due respect,” Wei Wuxian said, “If the Yin Iron can truly absorb natural energy, we may be able to turn it into something to put to good use.”**

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji warned.**

**“I am surprised,” Lan Yi stared at him, “What you said is the same as what I had thought.” Wei Wuxian gasped, “Being a woman, even after I became the Lan Sect Leader, people never stopped criticizing me. We were experiencing a reconstruction of the Sect. For years, I tried to break the old rules and find ways to innovate.”**

**She looked away, “All my life, I was fighting to revitalize the Lan Sect, yet I faced so many impediments and obstacles. Then one day, when I was having a chat with my friend, Baoshan Sanren, she mentioned the Yin Iron by accident.”**

**“B-Baoshan?” Wei Wuxian stammered, “Master Lan Yi are you an acquaintance of Baoshan Sanren?”**

Another allusion to his mother.

Jiang Yanli sighed. A-Cheng believed A-Xian took on this danger because of his obsession with Hanguang-Jun, but she could tell he did this for his mother. A-Xian felt no connection to his birth family. Of course he would seize something tangible at the first opportunity.

Lan Qiren's thoughts mirrored hers, and he felt slightly guilty. If he had told Wei Wuxian about his mother, would he have gotten more involved with the Yin Iron?

**The spirit smiled, "She was my best friend, the dearest to my heart, but I..." She shook her head, "I failed her."**

**"Why do you say so?" Wei Wuxian asked.**

**"Ever since I learned about the Yin Iron, I could not sleep. I dived into the Lan Sect's book collections and I was able to put the clues together," She explained, "I found the place where the Lan Sect's ancestors stored the fragment of the Yin Iron."**

**She looked around, "Cold Spring Cave is full of natural energy. Cold streams of air from all directions merged and condensed into a pond of cold water that will never freeze. It was not only the source of the Cold Spring, but also the best place to seal the Yin Iron."**

**"So this is the place where you found a fragment of the Yin Iron," Wei Wuxian concluded.**

**Lan Wangji slightly frowned, "If the Yin Iron cannot be neutralized...Why did you want to find it?"**

**"I thought the way you did, Wei-gongzi," She answered, "I was young and naive. I ignored the warnings."**

History often repeated itself.

Just as the Sects came together to defeat the Wen, as their ancestors had done centuries ago to the Xue, so were some destined to follow in the individual steps of their ancestors.

Except it was switched.

Wei Wuxian was Lan Yi in this, and Lan Wangji was Baoshan Sanren.

**"The fear was it couldn't be controlled, it might control you instead," Lan Wangji said.**

**She looked down and sighed, "Baoshan told me the same thing, but I had always done things my way and thought to have a clear conscience. I thought I was doing the right thing. I wanted to promote the Lan Sect's cultivation and heirlooms. I ignored her warning and entered into the forbidden ground."**

**"Unfortunately..." She took a deep breath and shook her head again, "At the end of the day, I was wrong."**

**"What happened?" Wei Wuxian asked, "Did Master Baoshan know about this?"**

**Lan Yi looked away, deep in thought, “You can probably tell what happened next. I could not neutralize the Yin Iron. Not only that, I also made a terrible mistake. Once the seal on the Yin Iron breaks, it can never be redone. I tried countless times, and they were all failures. As a result, I was badly injured.”**

**She paused again, “The Yin Iron was sealed here temporarily with all my energy and I can never leave this place.” She set the rabbit down and placed her hands on the guqin, “For so many years, my spiritual cognition has been guarding this place, the forbidden area of the Lan Sect. Since then, no one dared to step in.”**

If Lan Yi couldn't contain it, what hope did any of them have? Destroying it would be harder than containing it...but no one could be trusted with its power. Even if they could trust those in the present, how many decades would it take for another well-meaning individual to inadvertently release doom on the Sects.

If it cost Lan Yi everything, what did it cost Wei Wuxian?

**“How about my grandmaster then?” Wei Wuxian inquired.**

**Her hands drew back as she peered at him curiously, “Your grandmaster?”**

**“Honestly speaking,” Wei Wuxian said as Lan Wangji looked at him, “I am Wei Wuxian. Although I was adopted by the Jiang Sect as a child, Cangse Sanren is my mother and Baoshan Sanren is my grandmaster.”**

**She looked surprised, “It's been so many years.” She smiled, “At that time, Baoshan Sanren had no disciples. But now, her disciple already has a disciple, and he stands in front of me.” She shook her head, “What a pity. After I made the big mistake, she has lived in seclusion, and I felt too shameful to seek her.”**

**A somber silence settled.**

When history repeated itself, it offered a glimpse into the future.

Lan Wangji bowed his head. Was this Wei Ying's fate if he could not find a way to save him? Would Wei Ying take his Stygian Tiger Amulet and disappear? Would he never know what his fate would be? Would he linger in some cave, all his energy concentrated on fixing his mistake, containing his creation, until he faded away?

Jin Guangyao was right. He should have done more. He would not hesitate moving forward.

And if that left him in seclusion, at least he could say he did everything in his power for his love. He could imagine cultivating to immortality away from the cultivation world who had sentenced Wei Ying to death. He could see himself waiting for Wei Ying's reincarnation, wandering from mountain to mountain and training students to go out and do something good in the world.

Maybe Baoshan Sanren would finally find Lan Yi's reincarnation now that she had fully passed on from this life.

**“Master Lan Yi,” Lan Wangji broke it, “I also have a question to ask. Are you the one who led us to this place?”**

**She shook her head, “No.” The boys looked at each other, and she continued, “In the past one hundred years, I have used my spiritual power to suppress the Yin Iron in order to protect the wards in the back hill. Yet in the recent decade, the Yin Iron revealed traces of activation. My spiritual power is getting weaker. I’m afraid...the grievance of the Yin Iron has immersed into the water.”**

**“Master Lan Yi, why would the Yin Iron be like this in the last two decades?” Wei Wuxian inquired.**

**“If my guess is right,” She answered, “The other shards of the Yin Iron have appeared.”**

Two decades.

That’s how long they had just watched Wen Ruohan and the Wen Sect descend into tyranny.

That’s how long it took them to find the evil amongst them.

It took them too damn long. While many certainly saw Wen Ruohan’s crimes coming, only Nie Mingjue prepared his Sect for what came.

Perhaps that was why they wanted the Yiling Patriarch dealt with as soon as possible, as penance for their previous inaction.

**The boys looked at each other again, Wei Wuxian continuing, “It can be assumed that the cultivator we saw last time, whose spirit was taken, was another puppet that was created, similar to Xue Chonghai.”**

**“They are experimenting,” Lan Wangji guessed.**

**Lan Yi sighed, “Since I broke the seal, the shards of the Yin Iron have been able to sense each other. I’m so lucky to have lived for a hundred years. The day comes, anyway.”**

**“Master Lan Yi,” Wei Wuxian paused, “Are there any other methods to prevent the Yin Iron from bringing disaster to the people?”**

**“The Yin Iron is the spirit of heaven and earth which can’t be eradicated. The grievance came after it was broken into pieces. Evil things will go to the places where it lies. The only way is to find these shards and repress them in the Cold Pond Cave,” She answered.**

“Is that even possible anymore?” Jin Guangyao wondered.

“Perhaps,” Er-ge answered, “If the Sects decide we are trustworthy.”

Which they might not, given the revelation of Lan Wangji’s relationship to the Yiling Patriarch.



Besides, that was just delaying the problem until another ambitious Lan Sect member decided they knew better than everybody else.

**“Yet...” She trailed off, her form becoming slightly transparent, “I’m unable to fix my mistake by myself.”**

**“Master Lan Yi,” The boys said together in concern.**

**“Don’t panic,” She assured them, “My final day is coming soon. I live to repay my debt. Now that you’ve come here, I don’t need to force my efforts.” She continued fading.**

**Lan Wangji knelt and saluted, “As a descendent of the Lan Sect, I’ll try my best to accomplish your wish of finding the Yin Iron and sealing it in the Cold Pond Cave.”**

**He bowed, which forced Wei Wuxian to kneel. He also saluted and bowed, “Me too.”**

**Lan Wangji side-eyed him, “It’s a family matter of the Lan Sect. It’s none of your business.”**

**“Lan Zhan,” He stared back, “You can’t stop me anyway. Although I grew up in the YunmengJiang, I can tell what’s fair and what isn’t. Besides, my grandmaster was isolated for a century for the Yin Iron. It’s part of my duty.”**

**Lan Yi was almost gone, but interjected, “As a disciple of Baoshan, you are right.” Wei Wuxian smiled at her, then juttied his chin at Lan Wangji. She continued, “Remember this. To seal the Yin Iron, there must be many barriers. Anyway, I hope you can avoid making the mistake I did.”**

**“Please be assured,” Wei Wuxian responded, “I’ll do my best.”**

Many around the room scoffed.

“He failed!”

Nie Huaisang tilted his head, “That would depend on how you define failure. He did find a way to use the Yin Iron to help us, didn’t he?”

He exchanged a long look with Jiang Cheng. He was happy to finally know the entire backstory behind the quest he’d unwittingly joined, but it made everything sadder. Wei-xiong was warned about demonic cultivation. He was warned about the Yin Iron.

He wasn’t an idiot. On the contrary, his friend was a genius. Did the burning of Lotus Pier drive him so far to forget this? Or had his three month disappearance driven him to it? Either way, he was now more certain becoming the Yiling Patriarch was the only choice Wei Wuxian had. He wouldn’t make the same mistakes as others if it wasn’t.

**She faded away completely and the Yin Iron fell.**

**“Master Lan Yi!” Wei Wuxian shouted, “You haven’t told us where the other pieces are!”**

**There was no response.**

And thus, a legend passed on, leaving her burden to the two young men before her.

“Would it be possible to tell Baoshan Sanren of her fate?” Jiang Yanli inquired softly.

Madame Jin smiled at her daughter-in-law, “I’ll be sure word spreads to all the cultivation world of her sacrifice. Hopefully, it will reach her.”

As painful as watching Lotus Pier fall would be, she wanted to know what Ziyuan’s final words to her son were. She may never know how she died, but she hoped for once, her sworn sister let herself express how much she loved her children.

**The memory shifted to Wen Qing walking along the back hill. She thought to herself, “Does Cloud Recesses have an enchantment at the back hill just to protect the mountain?”**

**She sped up, but before she got too far Jiang Cheng called out to her, “Wen-guniang!” He came running out of the woods.**

**“Jiang-gongzi,” She greeted.**

**“Wen-guniang,” He smiled, “Are you here to look for Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji too?”**

**She hummed and nodded.**

“Who knew Cloud Recesses was such a romantic place?” Huaisang fanned himself.

Nie Mingjue eyed him suspiciously, before deciding to play along. This was probably Huaisang’s way of apologizing for causing all the tension in the first place. If there was one thing the small man did well, it was create distractions, “Where is your intended?”

His little brother gasped in mock offense, but his eyes lit up at the teasing, “Ah, but who is still single from our class?” He pondered the question, before standing and peering around the seated cultivators, “Luo Qingyang! Come sit with me!”

A young woman he vaguely remembered from the Sunshot Campaign and the memories approached hesitantly, but gained confidence as Huaisang gestured for servants to add a table between theirs. She bowed to him, “Thank you, Nie Huaisang.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” He sat down, “You’re here to protect me if Da-ge gets mad again.”

“Of course,” Lady Luo laughed, “It is not at all because you want someone to gossip with.” She turned to him, “Nie-zongzhu.”

“Luo-guniang.” He gestured for her to sit, noticing the smile she shared with Madame Jiang and Jin Zixuan.

“Be nice to her, Da-ge,” Huaisang teased as she sat between them, “Maybe now that everyone knows Wei-xiong is pining after Hanguang-Jun you can return to high society.”

“Why would I do that?”

Nie Mingjue snorted. If he was in the Jin Sect he'd be fed up with all the political games too. He noted the slight tension in her shoulders and remembered who she was. She was the one who spoke in Wei Wuxian's defense. When no one listened to her, she left the Jin Sect. He supposed she would become more involved in events from here forward.

If Wei Wuxian was worth her defection, he could offer her a place in the Nie Sect.

**Before he could respond, they heard Wei Wuxian shouting, “Lan Zhan!” The two fell out from behind the ward, tumbling onto the ground together. Lan Wangji was stuck on his back, with Wei Wuxian knelt over him, “Lan Zhan, I didn't mean to.” Lan Wangji looked to their connected wrists as Wei Wuxian balanced on his sword.**

**“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng shouted.**

**Wei Wuxian beamed, but didn't get up, “Jiang Cheng!” He laughed as the two approached.**

**“Get up,” Lan Wangji ordered.**

His embarrassment was so obvious now.

**“Okay, sure,” He laughed as they both made to stand. Once the forehead ribbon was back in place, he moved closer, “Jiang Cheng. Wen Qing. Why are you here?”**

**“I should be the one asking that question,” Jiang Cheng's eyebrows scrunched together in anger, “Wei Wuxian! Where were you the whole day and night? Do you know A-Jie was too worried to eat or sleep? If I couldn't find you, I'd have to send a letter to inform my father.”**

**“Ha?” Wei Wuxian looked confused.**

**“One day and one night have passed,” Lan Wangji repeated.**

**“Yes,” Jiang Cheng looked to him, “Zewu-Jun has also been looking for you without rest.” His gaze darted back to his brother, “Do you know that everyone is worried about you?” The boys looked at each other, “Where did you go?”**

**“I'll tell you when we get back,” Wei Wuxian evaded, “It's a long story.”**

Jiang Cheng scowled. Another broken promise.

He wasn't as upset as he thought he'd be. He was right. This wasn't a concern of the Jiang Sect, but that didn't mean it wasn't Wei Wuxian's concern. If the idiot had just told him he was doing this to honor his mother and grandmaster, what could he have done to forbid it?

He scowled because Wei Wuxian learned early never to mention his mother. He knew if he told them he was doing this Madame Yu's wrath would be worse than if he'd just disappeared without an explanation.

**“Wait,” Wen Qing interjected, “There is a hint of coldness between your eyebrows. What’s inside that place?”**

**“We wanted to cure our injuries in the Cold Spring,” Wei Wuxian answered, “But we were carried away to an extremely cold place by a whirlpool of rapid water.”**

**“What place?” Jiang Cheng demanded, “How could this happen in Cloud Recesses?”**

**“We were trapped for a long time,” Wei Wuxian lied, “We swam for so long that we exhausted our strength just to find this exit.”**

**“What’s inside?” Wen Qing asked.**

**“There-” Lan Wangji started.**

**“Nothing,” Wei Wuxian interrupted with another smooth lie, “It’s all water and ice. Let me tell you, I was almost frozen inside there.” He turned back and smiled secretly at Lan Wangji, who averted his gaze.**

**“Fine,” Jiang Cheng reluctantly accepted, “Go back first to ease their worries.”**

**“Yes, exactly,” Wei Wuxian agreed, wrapping an arm around his shoulder, “Let’s go. Go.”**

Jin Guangyao was impressed. He assumed Wei Wuxian was good at lying, but the earlier memories made him doubt that assumption.

Of course Wei Wuxian was a good liar. There was no way he was cheerful and carefree when his entire existence depended on Jiang Fengmian’s favor. If he lost it, Madame Yu would have tossed him out. Though maybe he embodied the Jiang Sect motto precisely for Jiang Fengmian’s approval.

He wondered if he should adapt his outfit to wear more black. It would certainly be easier to smile if the drinks purposely spilled on him couldn’t stain. Nor would dirt show as easily when he was shoved to the ground, or blood when he wasn’t fast enough to avoid the crueller of the objectors to his existence.

Was that how Wei Wuxian forgave so easily?

He adjusted his robes self-consciously. His goals hadn’t changed much, but he approached this wrong. He saw Wei Wuxian as someone uncontrollable, but they were the same in some ways. They both wanted the acceptance and love of their families. They wanted to be useful, even if they were used for terrible deeds.

Jin Guangyao thought no one understood him. Wouldn’t it be just his luck if the person who could was the person he was ordered to get rid of?

Another chapter down! Thanks again to all who commented on the previous one! I'm always happy when my attempts at humor land!

Quick question for y'all. Do you think Jin Guangyao helped Xue Yang escape the Unclean Realm? His answer in Episode 48 is kind of, and then he says it doesn't really matter since everyone thinks he did it anyways.

I interpret kind of in many ways, but I'm curious what y'all think! All I can say with certainty is they talked. We've got a few more chapters before we reach the Unclean Realm. Any and all opinions are helpful and wanted!

# My Place? It Certainly Isn't Here

## Chapter Summary

If it's anywhere, it's by your side.

## Chapter Notes

Or, more specifically, with the bunnies.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Hanguang-Jun had the Yin Iron. He and Wei Wuxian now had a quest.

**Lan Xichen suppressed the piece of Yin Iron as best he could. Lan Qiren then pulled out a qiankun bag and sealed it inside, “The dangerous lot is unavoidable.”**

**“Shufu, Xiongzhong,” Lan Wangji looked betrayed, “You already knew.”**

“I’m sorry, Wangji,” Lan Xichen muttered.

“I forgave you,” Lan Wangji replied.

What was there to begrudge? His older brother was the Sect Leader. Try as he might, there were some burdens he couldn’t share. Lan Wangji did his best to carry and protect the Yin Iron, but neither of them expected the attack from the Wen Sect. The tragedies that followed this weren’t his fault.

At least, not his fault alone.

**“Since Master Lan Yi broke the rules,” Lan Xichen answered, “The Lan Sect has forbidden people from entering the back hill. They are afraid the grievance of the Yin Iron may affect the people. Thus in the Five Sects, only the masters of the Lan Sect know the story of what happened to the Yin Iron and will impart it to the next generation.”**

**Wei Wuxian gestured with his sword, “That’s why the spirit snatching happened and a Waterborne Abyss appeared. Zewu-Jun, you already knew that they may be connected to the Yin Iron.”**

**“Wei-gongzi is so smart,” Lan Xichen replied, “Your conjecture when we were at Biling Lake was essentially right. Wangji, when you came to ask me about it, I was unable to**

**tell you the answer.”**

**Wei Wuxian bumped their shoulders together, “My soulmate.”**

“Soulmates?” MianMian repeated.

Nie Huaisang laughed, “If one of my ancestors appeared to me and my husband telling us we had to resolve the mistakes of both of our ancestors, I’d think we were meant to be.”

She nodded slowly. That made sense.

“I thought Hanguang-Jun’s feelings were unrequited.” Sect Leader Jin commented.

“Ah, I don’t know,” Nie Huaisang opened his fan and hid his face, “I mean, soulmates don’t have to be romantic, right?”

“If Wei Wuxian loved my brother, he would have given up demonic cultivation when he asked,” Sect Leader Lan argued, his tone more decisive.

Sect Leader Jiang’s glare would have killed a lesser man, but he kept his silence at a warning glance from Jiang Yanli. It was dangerous for Hanguang-Jun’s reputation for him to be in love with Wei Wuxian. It would physically put him in danger if they thought they could use Hanguang-Jun against Wei Wuxian.

It was almost funny. If anyone asked her who had the thinner face, she would have said Wei Wuxian. But his flirting came in the form of teasing. Teasing could be misinterpreted as insincere. Given his alleged actions...she supposed it made sense for them to think Hanguang-Jun’s love was unrequited.

“Wei Wuxian isn’t in love,” Lianfeng-Zun said confidently.

“How do you know?” Jin Zixuan asked.

“How could the son of a servant marry the Second Jade of Lan?”

“That wouldn’t matter,” Hanguang-Jun sat up straighter.

“To you, perhaps,” Lianfeng-Zun sipped his tea, “Wei Wuxian may not act like it, but he’s a smart man. He knows his place.”

MianMian nodded. For all the rumors about herself and Jin Zixuan, she was pragmatic. He was a good friend, but he could never be more than a friend. Not to someone like her, who didn’t have the family background to support such a match. Jiang Wanyin might be able to adopt Wei Wuxian officially as a member of his family, giving him the position to marry Hanguang-Jun...

But Jiang Fengmian? She couldn’t imagine the mild-mannered man who avoided conflict officially adopting Wei Wuxian with Madame Yu around. She’d met the Violet Spider a few times when she visited Lanling. She would not have allowed an adoption to go through without consequences.

So Wei Wuxian wasn't in love with Hanguang-Jun. He couldn't be.

**“Now things have happened,” Lan Xichen continued, “Shufu thought they may be connected to the Yin Iron, so he asked me to check the entertainment. It was really awakened. That time, Shufu went to Qinghe to discuss this with Nie-zongzhu but it didn't occur to me. You entered the cave so soon and I didn't expect the Yin Iron to appear.”**

**They stopped talking as they heard the cries of a bird. They ran to the doorway of the building to see it flapping against the wards.**

**“It's the QishanWen again,” Wei Wuxian exclaimed.**

**“Don't chase it,” Lan Xichen warned as his brother moved to fight it.**

**“It seems the QishanWen really came here for the Yin Iron,” Lan Wangji observed.**

Here.

Here is where Wei Wuxian should have given up on the Wen siblings.

Jiang Cheng didn't hear about the Yin Iron until after Wen Qing proved she was willing to go against Wen Chao. But Wei Wuxian didn't know that. He only had his impression of the siblings. Granted, his impression was right...

No, that wasn't it, was it? He couldn't help but feel like Lianfeng-Zun's words were directed at him. Wei Wuxian's place. It wasn't just that he was the son of a servant that he couldn't marry Lan Wangji.

He couldn't marry Lan Wangji because his place was by his side. Marrying Lan Wangji meant joining the Lan Sect and leaving the Jiang Sect.

Jiang Cheng held back a bitter laugh. Of course Wei Wuxian wouldn't leave him for some selfish reason like marrying his soulmate. Only he was so selfless, so noble. The rest of them could only observe in awe. He glanced at Lan Xichen, who seemed to genuinely believe Wei Wuxian wasn't in love with his brother.

Soon he would see just how much Wei Wuxian loved Hanguang-Jun.

He would know how much that love cost the Jiang Sect.

**“Master Lan Yi said that the shards of the Yin Iron started to reactivate in the recent decade because of the appearance of the other pieces,” Wei Wuxian said.**

**“Our prediction was right,” Lan Xichen confirmed, “Wen Ruohan owned a shard of the Yin Iron. Another shard is in Cloud Recesses. That's why he sent people to acquire it.”**

**“How did Wen Ruohan know that Gusu has one piece?” Lan Wangji asked.**



**Lan Qiren moved to sit at the table, setting the piece on it in front of them, “The Yin Iron repressed the whole world, yet hundreds of years have passed and no one knew where it was. Since Wen Ruohan was able to get one shard of the Yin Iron, he must have received help from someone.”**

**“Xue Yang,” Jin Guangyao commented.**

He was still trying to decide whether sharing his memories would benefit him or get him thrown out. He never did explain to Nie Mingjue what happened during the Wen attack on the Unclean Realm. It didn't matter to the Nie Sect Leader why he killed the captain, only that he had. In his heart, he knew his reasoning wasn't enough for the just man.

But maybe, just maybe, he would be sympathetic after watching his memories. It wouldn't change Er-ge's view of him, but he always saw the best in him.

There was nothing his eldest sworn brother prided higher than honesty. This was him being honest.

**“Master Lan Yi said that the pieces of the Yin Iron can feel each other,” Wei Wuxian thought aloud, “Since we have one, why not use it to find the others?” He held up his sword triumphantly, exchanged a look with Lan Wangji, and nodded.**

**“Shufu, Xiongzhang, what shall we do now?” Lan Wangji asked.**

**“When the Yin Iron appears and falls into the hands of evil people, disasters will be brought,” Lan Qiren warned, “Now we can only seal it and put it back in the Cold Pond Cave, and set up the enchantment again, then no one can get near it.”**

**“Shufu,” Lan Wangji argued, “Wen Ruohan has a shard of the Yin Iron already. Shards have associations. Even if we put it back into Cold Pond Cave, it won't change a thing.” Wei Wuxian nodded, “Besides, Wen Ruohan desires the Yin Iron. I'm afraid we can't hide it from him.”**

**“Let's discuss it later,” Lan Qiren decided.**

**“Shufu-” Lan Wangji began another protest.**

**“Don't mention it again,” Lan Qiren interrupted, “This is a secret of the great Sects.”**

**“Grandmaster,” Wei Wuxian held up a hand, then made the three finger salute, “Don't worry. I won't tell anyone.”**

**Lan Qiren nodded and Lan Xichen smiled.**

“Wait,” Jiang Wanyin frowned, “If you didn't decide to send Hanguang-Jun then, how did Wei Wuxian know about it?”

Lan Xichen blinked. He glanced at his brother, “Did you ask him?”

Wangji shook his head.

Then how did Wei Wuxian find out he was leaving? He remembered he was surprised when he returned from hiding that Wangji, Wei Wuxian, Jiang Wanyin, and Huaisang were all involved in the quest, but it never occurred to him it wasn't by his brother's design. But of course Wangji didn't tell Wei Wuxian, not when he seemed so set on avoiding him and his feelings.

"They're soulmates, Jiang-xiong," Huaisang dismissed, "Their paths are fated to cross."

The young men were dismissed, but before they made it far Nie Huaisang came running towards them, "Wei-xiong! Wei-xiong!" He stopped and hastily bowed, "Lan-er-gongzi." Then he rose and huddled closer to his friend, "Wei-xiong, I knew you'd come back alive. Where did you go? Why did Zewu-Jun come to see you? Did he beat you again?"

Wei Wuxian tapped his sword along his neck, "Rest assured, I won't be beaten again, but Cloud Recesses is too big. Lan-er-gongzi almost got lost."

"Got lost going to the Cold Spring?" Nie Huaisang clarified skeptically, "You two had been missing the whole night. Did you experience anything strange?"

"Anything strange?" Wei Wuxian repeated, "Ah. There was one. Do you want to know?"

"Yes," Nie Huaisang nodded eagerly.

"Come here," Wei Wuxian wrapped an arm around him while Lan Wangji watched warningly, "It was a dark night yesterday with big winds sweeping in. A pair of hands suddenly stretched out of the Cold Spring and pulled us into the pool. Guess what it was?"

"What?" Nie Huaisang wondered.

"A devil snake!" Wei Wuxian shouted in his face, causing the other to start to pull away. He stopped him, "Ah, stay here. Do you want to know what it looked like?"

"Don't tell me. Don't tell me," Nie Huaisang broke away, "I'm afraid of snakes." He waved his fan at him, "That kind of experience...just keep it to yourself. I'll just leave."

People laughed.

That was certainly one way to keep the secret.

Nie Mingjue was impressed. Usually, when Huaisang suspected anything was being kept from him, he became insufferable. He thought it would be infinitely worse for his friends who didn't intimidate him. But either his young brother didn't care what happened as long as Wei Wuxian was safe, or he didn't feel entitled to his secrets.

Maybe he should try scaring him away next time.

If only he had the heart to. When he kept secrets from Huaisang he couldn't bring himself to be harsh with him. He was more than aware he was all his little brother had in the world.

Though this explained why he ended up on the quest.

**Nie Huaisang started to run away, but turned back, "Don't forget the lanterns tonight."**

**"Just go," Wei Wuxian waved him off, then turned to Lan Wangji.**

**Neither noticed Jiang Cheng's approach. The future Sect Leader stared at the two, but didn't interrupt their staring. Wei Wuxian eventually noticed them, "Jiang Cheng."**

**The boy rolled his eyes and walked away, "Eh!" Wei Wuxian chased after him, "Jiang Cheng." He wrapped his arm around him, "Why are you in such a hurry?"**

**Jiang Cheng brushed him off, "Wei Wuxian. You are familiar with Lan Wangji now. Why don't you go to his clan and stay at Cloud Recesses? Don't come back to Lotus Pier."**

"Jealous?" Jin Zixuan asked.

He wasn't sure why the others avoided talking about Wei Wuxian's feelings. Yes, it would put Hanguang-Jun in a difficult position. If they ended up condemning Wei Wuxian, the cultivation world would expect him to use the demonic cultivator's feelings against him. If there was one person they were certain he wouldn't hurt, of course they would use them.

But at the same time, he couldn't help but see the pity on Zewu-Jun's face whenever they talked about Hanguang-Jun's feelings for the other man.

If Zewu-Jun believed Hanguang-Jun's love was unrequited, then maybe Hanguang-Jun did as well.

Jin Zixuan empathized with him. He too reacted poorly to his feelings and almost ruined his chance for happiness with A-Li. For a time, he thought she no longer cared for him, and it was agonizing.

He wasn't qualified to say what was in Wei Wuxian's heart, but he was in a better position to get answers out of Jiang Wanyin.

His brother-in-law scowled, "Like you know what it's like to have a real brother."

Jin Zixuan flinched. Who knew how many half-siblings he had? Yet he wasn't close to any of them. He didn't know how to be. He knew it wasn't their fault they existed, but he couldn't get past the insult to his mother their presence created. He tried with Jin Guangyao sometimes. It just didn't seem like Jin Guangyao wanted to be friends with him, much less brothers.

**"What's wrong with you?" Wei Wuxian demanded, "Surely, Lotus Pier is much better. These 3,000 rules would finish me off." He put his arm around him again, "Don't think too much. Let's go."**

**Neither noticed Lan Wangji watching and listening, nor the way he looked saddened by the other's words. He turned and walked back to his relatives.**

Jiang Yanli grasped her husband's hand. She understood what he was trying to do, but she wasn't sure A-Xian knew his own heart. The last thing she wanted to do was promise A-Xian's heart to Hanguang-Jun when he wasn't ready to give it.

She would make it as obvious as possible.

Then maybe Hanguang-Jun wouldn't look so sad.

**Time skipped to the lantern ceremony. Disciples were gathered in small groups or working on their own. Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli worked awkwardly next to each other. Wei Wuxian sat next to Lan Wangji, painting theirs. His gaze flickered up, "Lan Zhan, shall we set a lantern together to make a wish since we have experienced a lot together?"**

**"I'm used to being alone," Lan Wangji answered.**

**Wei Wuxian sighed, "You can change your habits anyways and my lantern is specially made for you." He held it up, "Look."**

**It was a well-drawn rabbit. Lan Wangji stared at it, and his mouth curved up in a smile.**

**Wei Wuxian let out a delighted laugh, "You smiled."**

Hanguang-Jun never smiled.

"How adorable."

Many heard the story of Lan An, the founder of the Lan Sect. They knew he was a monk who abandoned immortality to spend the rest of his days with his fated one. The Lan Sect only existed because he descended from his mountain. It was easy to forget their romantic origins when confronted by their restrained manner.

But watching the two work on their lantern, in preparation of making another vow together, this time not to their ancestors but to the heavens...

Maybe their restraint was needed if Hanguang-Jun was already so devoted.

Lan Qiren stared at his nephew's smile. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen it. Why did it have to be Wei Wuxian who could draw it out of him?

**Embarrassed, Lan Wangji grabbed his sword. Wei Wuxian retreated directly into Nie Huaisang, crushing his lantern and setting the thin paper on fire, "Wei-xiong!" He complained, "Mine is the best of the best. I put a lot of effort into it. How can you just burn it?"**

**"Nie-xiong," Wei Wuxian placed his hands on his hips, "I'll make a new one for you."**

**Nie Huaisang kicked the burning lantern, “The paper was produced in the Cheyun Works in Qinghe. It’s as light as the wings of a cicada, as fine as jade, and worth thousands of gold. You can’t afford it.”**

Nie Huaisang narrowed his eyes at Lan Wangji, “It was you!”

“My apologies,” Lan Wangji offered.

“You let me blame Wei-xiong,” The smaller man crossed his arms petulantly.

“I will apologize to Wei Ying,” The stoic man replied.

**Nonetheless, they worked on another lantern made of the available materials. Soon enough, they were lifting off. Wei Wuxian turned his gaze away to stare at Lan Wangji. Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan met each other’s gazes, but looked away. Then everyone brought their hands together for their wishes.**

**“I wish I can graduate successfully so I won’t come back here again,” Nie Huaisang wished.**

**“I wish my little brother will be safe and sound for his whole life,” Wen Qing said, earning a stare from a nearby Jiang Cheng, “May he face no danger.” His expression softened into a smile.**

Jiang Cheng bowed his head. It was too bad Wen Qing’s didn’t come true. Her little brother was constantly in danger until he died. Though he supposed, in some twisted way, her wish was fulfilled. As a conscious corpse, he was immune from most danger and pain. He would have a long existence.

Even if it wasn’t technically a life.

**“I, Wei Wuxian, wish that I can always stand with justice and live with no regrets,” Wei Wuxian wished, earning Lan Wangji’s gaze. He brought out the pouch containing the Yin Iron, but his wish wasn’t shared.**

“What did you wish for, Wangji?” Lan Xichen asked, genuinely curious.

His little brother considered his question, before answering, “I wished to curb the violent and assist the weak.” He paused, “And to live with no regrets.”

So they made partially the same vow.

He wondered whose regret was greater? Did Wei Wuxian regret turning his back on orthodoxy and going into exile with their enemy more than Wangji regretted not going with him or stopping him? Did Wei Wuxian think standing with the Wen was standing with justice? If Wangji agreed with him...

Did that make them the violent ones? Were they bullying the weak?

He cleared his mind. There was no point to such thoughts when they would soon see the truth.

**“Shijie,” Wei Wuxian approached his sister, placing his hands on his hips, “What wish did you make?”**

**“I wished you will grow up soon and behave well,” She answered.**

**He narrowed his eyes, “Sure, you did.” He tilted his head, “You must have wished to have a good marriage.”**

“So he didn’t always hate me,” Jin Zixuan commented.

“All he’s ever wanted is for me to be happy,” Madam Jiang smiled, “You make me happy now.”

“Now,” Jiang Wanyin stressed.

Huaisang tilted his head, “Oh, right. This is the first time Wei-xiong punched Jin Zixuan.”

“How many times does he punch you?” Nie Mingjue frowned. The rumors about Jin Zixuan and Wei Wuxian were mixed, so he never listened to them. After all, he wouldn’t put it past the Jin Sect to lie to protect their heir’s reputation. He also wouldn’t put it past Wei Wuxian to be overprotective of his sister to the point of unreasonable violence.

Jin Zixuan grimaced, “Every time I was an idiot.”

“He was insensitive to A-Jie’s feelings,” Jiang Wanyin crossed his arms.

“It’s okay, Jin Zixuan,” His little brother grinned, “We can keep a list of how many times Wei-xiong is insensitive to Hanguang-Jun’s feelings and you can punch him for Er-ge.”

Lady Luo laughed, and Nie Mingjue found himself laughing as well. Xichen would never lower himself to revenge for anything less than his brother.

“Unnecessary,” Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes.

“So you’re saying you never got close to confessing and Wei-xiong acted like an idiot?” Huaisang teased.

It was interesting to see Lan Wangji’s version of a blush, and he was suddenly grateful his little brother was not in love. Maybe he would see about arranging Huaisang’s visit to a matchmaker after this was over. If ever there was an argument in favor of matchmaking, it was seeing what messes the three siblings from Lotus Pier created without one.

**Behind him, MianMian giggled, darting forward, “Jiang-guniang’s marriage has been set already. She doesn’t have to ask for it.”**

**Other girls joined them, “The bridegroom is right there. How could Jiang-guniang launch the lantern alone?”**

**“They just made it together,” Another commented.**

**“I heard that Jin-gongzi and Jiang-guniang will get married soon.” Another chimed in, “Why don’t you launch the lantern together and wish for your happiness?”**

**“Yes, Jin-gongzi,” MianMian turned back to him, “Altair meets Lyra once a year. They will bless you with happiness.”**

**“MianMian, it’s time to go,” Was all Jin Zixuan said. He left, the Jin Sect disciples hurrying to follow him. Jiang Yanli looked away sadly, so Wei Wuxian chased after him.**

**“An idiot!” Jin Zixuan proclaimed.**

Madame Jin sighed. She completely misinterpreted this. She thought Wei Wuxian was acting protectively out of an interest in A-Li. She didn’t consider that, after her son’s repeated rejections, Wei Wuxian would consider A-Xuan a threat to A-Li.

If he was innocent, she would organize her own apology.

She couldn’t blame Wei Wuxian for thinking the worst of her son’s character. Just look at who his father was.

**“Where are you going?” Jiang Cheng shouted after him, “Wei Wuxian!”**

**Wei Wuxian rounded the corner and hurried to catch up. He overheard Jin Zixuan speaking, “Listen, MianMian. I didn’t want this marriage. Don’t mention it again.”**

**“Wait!” Wei Wuxian called out, “What do you mean by don’t mention it again?”**

**“Wei Wuxian,” Jin Zixuan glared, “Does it have something to do with you?”**

**He closed the gap between them. MianMian stared at him, “Wei-gongzi.”**

**“What do you mean by don’t mention it again?” Wei Wuxian repeated louder.**

**Jin Zixuan took a step closer, “Is that difficult to understand?” He tilted his head, “Don’t mention it again.”**

**Wei Wuxian sneered, “You...”**

**Whatever was said next was skipped, the memory showing only the aftermath of the fight.**

Jiang Yanli was grateful her brother spared her husband that embarrassment.

Or maybe he was trying to spare her feelings.

**“What did he say?”**

**“It must have been terrible.”**

“Wei Wuxian’s never got angry before.”

“What did you say?” A-Cheng wondered, his hands clenched into fists.

Her husband stared at the projection, “He asked what about A-Li I could be unsatisfied with, and I asked him what about her I could possibly be satisfied with.” The comments ceased, “I am sorry, my love.”

She just squeezed his hand, “It was so long ago.”

**“I’ll beat you to death!” Wei Wuxian shouted, restrained by Jiang Cheng and a Lan disciple.**

**“Don’t stop me!” Jin Zixuan likewise shouted as he was restrained by Jin disciples.**

**“Stop, Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji moved between them.**

**“Don’t stop me, Lan Zhan.” His struggles increased as more tried to stop them.**

**“Let me go!”**

**“You’re dead!”**

**“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli fought her way through the crowd. She glanced back at the furious Jin Zixuan, then at her little brother, “A-Xian.” He finally calmed down.**

**“I heard that Jin-gongzi looked down on Jiang-guniang.” A Nie disciple spoke from behind Nie Huaisang, who had also placed himself between the two, “He wants to break the betrothal. Wei Wuxian is defending his Shijie.”**

**Jiang Yanli took a shaky breath in, and started to fiddle with Wei Wuxian’s hair and robes, “A-Xian. Let’s go home.” She tugged him away.**

Jin Guangshan noted the power his daughter-in-law had over the future demonic cultivator. She stopped him where Jiang Wanyin and Hanguang-Jun couldn’t.

He agreed to the betrothal of his only son to appease his wife. An alliance with the Jiang Sect was a bonus. When they decided to break it, he was partially relieved. His son could finally be free of that commitment. There would no longer be any dishonor if he let himself explore, find his pleasure wherever it was offered.

But of course A-Xuan fell in love with her. His weak son was always too much like his mother, and if their marriage proved anything, it was how much more power A-Li had over her husband than he did over her.

He planned to put off handing over more responsibility to A-Xuan until that changed, but maybe he underestimated her.

Pain didn’t affect Wei Wuxian. Nor was there anything to suggest he was manipulable through money or other rewards. Not even Hanguang-Jun could tempt him, and the man was



beautiful by any standard. But if A-Li could control him, and he was brought into the Jin Sect for ‘rehabilitation’, then it could work to his advantage.

**It cut to Lan Wangji walking through the halls of Cloud Recesses. He noticed Wei Wuxian kneeling. From his perspective, it looked like the kneeling boy’s shoulders heaved up and down as he cried. He moved closer, “Wei Ying. Since you know you were wrong, why did you still do it?”**

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian beamed, “Look Lan Zhan, so many black ants. Look. Look.”**

A few snorted. Hanguang-Jun’s concern was genuine, if unnecessary.

There was nothing that could take a smile off Wei Wuxian’s smile for long.

**Lan Wangji stared at him, “You were asked to kneel and reflect. How can you play with ants?” He flicked his robes, embarrassed at himself, “So unteachable.”**

**“But these ants are so,” Wei Wuxian stopped trying to talk to him, but continued to himself, “So cute.”**

**When Jiang Cheng walked by with his father, he was using the small stones to throw at the ants. He rose, “Jiang-shushu, why are you here?”**

**“Kneel,” Jiang Fengmian ordered.**

Jiang Cheng stared at the projection of his father for a moment, before averting his gaze. What would his father say if he could see him now? Would he be proud of how he reclaimed Lotus Pier and rebuilt the Jiang Sect? Or would he be ashamed of how much it cost them? After all, he rebuilt the Jiang Sect, but he couldn’t imbue it with the Jiang Sect spirit.

Do the right thing, even if it seems impossible.

Attempt the impossible.

Wei Wuxian could have brought that. He could have done everything he did and more. He could have truly brought the Jiang Sect back to what it was before, elevated it even.

Meanwhile, he went along with the farce of a defection because he wasn’t enough.

Jiang Yanli continued to stare at her father, holding A-Ling up slightly so he could see his maternal grandfather as well. A selfish part of her wanted to ask Nie Huaisang if she could keep the orb.

Maybe this was the true reason they lost popularity. The temptation to linger was too great.

The past belonged in the past.

**“You kneel down so quickly,” Jiang Cheng lingered as his father walked away.**

**Wei Wuxian stretched, “I have often been punished, you know that,” He laughed, “But as for Jin Zixuan, that peacock, he must not be used to kneeling. I would change my surname if he didn’t cry because of the kneeling.”**

**“Aren’t you ashamed of saying that?” Jiang Cheng asked, “A-die traveled a long way here just for you. Later, you will be scolded by Grandmaster Lan.”**

“Should he be ashamed of defending his Shijie?”

“He should not have struck the heir of a great Sect.”

“Even when the heir is in the wrong?”

“Is that not how the Wen Sect went unchallenged for so long?”

“Is that the world we live in? That just because you hold some title and your family is powerful, you can do whatever you want without consequence?”

“Are you saying we should be more like Wei Wuxian?”

“Of course not!”

“But perhaps not all his actions were unrighteous...”

**Jiang Cheng went to stand behind his father and waited for Sect Leader Jin to arrive. He watched as the two men decided to break the betrothal, then hurried out. He leapt over one of the handrails to land before Wei Wuxian, “Bad news! A-Jie’s going to break her betrothal with Jin Zixuan.”**

**“What?” Wei Wuxian rose, “He wants to be beaten one more time? How dare he!” He bent down to retrieve his sword.**

**“No,” Jiang Cheng stopped him, “It was A-die who brought it up.”**

**“Jiang-shushu?”**

**“Yes.”**

**“Where is Shijie?”**

**“Inside the room.”**

**Wei Wuxian took off running.**

“Why did he...?” Jin Zixuan trailed off.

“We might have hated you, but we always wanted A-Jie to be happy,” Jiang Wanyin scowled.

Jin Guangyao wondered what his own marriage prospects would be. Out of all the major Sects, the only daughter came from the Jiang Sect. Jiang Yanli was already happily married. Da-ge and Er-ge showed no interest in marriage, but he supposed one day they would have to

in order to produce an heir. Given Hanguang-Jun's predilections, Er-ge would be pressured soon.

He honestly had no idea about Huaisang, but he doubted anyone in the Nie Sect wanted him to continue the line.

As for himself...he supposed he wouldn't be given much of a choice in the matter. There were a few minor Sects with daughters of a marriageable age. Whoever his father decided would be the one he married, if they could be persuaded to marry a bastard at all.

There wouldn't be an epic love story for him.

**It didn't take him long to reach the female disciple's guest quarters, but he hesitated. He peered through an open window first to see his sister holding a gold talisman. She set it down sadly. He pulled out a paperman and gave it spiritual energy. The paperman quickly made its way towards her.**

**It waved, then bowed. She let it rest in her hand, "A-Xian. I know it's you."**

**He ducked away, but she opened the doors before he could get too far, "A-Xian," She walked out to him.**

**"Shijie-"**

**"Are you okay after kneeling for so long?" She interrupted, "How are your knees? Let me check them."**

**She bent down, and he stopped her, "Shijie. It's my fault. I might feel better."**

**"A-Xian," She assured him, "This has nothing to do with you. Don't think too much." She turned away, "As for my destiny, it's not up to me."**

**He moved to her other side, "Shijie...You will marry someone much better than him." She looked at him and they both smiled.**

**"You will have a beautiful lady to marry," She returned, patting his head.**

**"No," He denied, "I don't want one. I just want to stay with my Shijie in Lotus Pier."**

Lan Wangji considered his words. It didn't matter to him that Wei Ying was the son of a servant. He never thought it would matter to Wei Ying. He never acted like he was aware of the difference in rank. He treated people how they deserved to be treated, with only the bare minimum reverence for those who required respect.

It was unfair to reduce a person to their birth.

It was also unfair to reduce Wei Ying to just his cultivation.

Really, his love was treated unfairly for simply being him.

**“A-Xian,” She kept smiling, “Our visit will end soon. We’ll go back in a day or two.”**

**“That soon?” He asked.**

**“Didn’t you have enough fun?” She asked back, “A-die said we will leave when A-Cheng gets back. We’ll say farewell to Grandmaster Lan.”**

**It skipped to a meeting between Lan Qiren, Jiang Fengmian, and Lan Xichen. Jiang Fengmian was speaking, “Recently I heard that several small sects in Yueyang were slaughtered. No one survived. I don’t know who’s behind this but the murderer is a young guest of the Wen Sect.”**

**“How could this happen?” Lan Qiren demanded.**

**“The Wen Sect has revealed its ambition.” Lan Xichen glanced between the two, “We have to hurry.”**

**“Did you tell Jiang Fengmian of the Yin Iron?” Jin Guangshan inquired.**

**Lan Xichen held back a wince, “I thought it appropriate, given Wei Wuxian’s knowledge.”**

He’d shared the bare minimum of his interaction with the former Jiang Sect Leader to avoid offense and an uncomfortable situation for the Jiang siblings. He wasn’t sure how he would feel watching memories of his deceased parents, but he’d never been close to his own parents. He refused to inflict more pain on Jiang Wanyin and Madam Jiang.

This was already hard enough.

**There was a knock on the door. Lan Xichen took a moment to lower the wards around the room, then called for the guest to enter. It was only the trio from Lotus Pier who entered. They saluted, “We disciples are here to bid farewell to Grandmaster Lan and Lan-zongzhu.” They bowed.**

**Lan Xichen cleared his throat, “One will be awarded for merits and one will be punished for faults. Wei-gongzi, you have been punished for your fault in Cloud Recesses. As for merits, Jiang-zongzhu must have his awards.”**

**“What merits does he have?” Jiang Cheng muttered, earning an elbow from his brother.**

**“Jiang-zongzhu, you should discipline Wei Ying more strictly,” Lan Qiren advised, “Before he came, these youngsters didn’t dare do anything. But since he got here, these cowards have been encouraged to flee at night and drink wine in secret.”**

Nie Huaisang flinched at being called a coward, but felt bad for Jiang-xiong.

He was closer to Wei-xiong because of their similar interests. They could talk about wine or porn or poetry, anything that wasn’t cultivation. They both understood what it meant to have interests that others considered useless. Wei-xiong depended on talismans long before he gave up traditional cultivation. He himself loved art over his saber.

Jiang-xiong understood what it meant to not fit in with his Sect. He understood what it was like to not measure up to his older brother, to always be inferior, second best. But somehow, even though standing in their brother's shadow hurt, they couldn't imagine not having their brother with them.

It was a terrible feeling.

**Jiang Fengmian glanced at his head disciple, but turned back with a smile, "He's always been like this. Thank you for Grandmaster Lan's discipline." He bowed.**

**Lan Qiren stroked his beard, but before he could continue, there was a knock at the door. Lan Wangji entered.**

**"Wangji, what happened?" Lan Xichen asked.**

**He said nothing, and Jiang Fengmian realized it was a secret matter. He rose, "I'll leave now."**

**"Jiang-zongzhu."**

**"Rest assured. I understand the importance. If you give us an order, our Sect will do its best." They bowed to each other, "I'll leave now."**

**"Take care," Lan Xichen said.**

**Wei Wuxian lingered, "Lan Zhan, as for the Yin Iron..." He clicked his tongue as he was ignored, "Lan Zhan."**

**"Seriously," Jiang Cheng frowned, "How did he know?"**

**"Soulmates," Nie Huaisang sang.**

And of course, since his father was aware of the Yin Iron, he didn't care when Wei Wuxian disappeared on their way back. He was getting used to the sight of him again, deciding to just take in the sight and sound of him before it was forever relegated to in his head.

Maybe it would help to see this again. Maybe he could see what Nie Huaisang and Lianfeng-Zun hinted at, see how Wei Wuxian wasn't actually favored, but rather pitied or treated differently because he wasn't actually his father's son. Maybe he could be objective about this.

**"Follow me," Jiang Cheng grabbed his arm.**

**"Wangji," Lan Xichen approached his brother, "Take care of yourself."**

**Wei Wuxian glanced back and saw Wangji bow his head. He lingered again as he saw the worry on Lan Xichen's face. Jiang Cheng forced him out of the room, "Wei Wuxian, are you crazy? He dislikes you so much. Why are you so close to him?"**

**“Why?” Wei Wuxian asked, “After spending half a year together, can’t I say goodbye?”**

**“I want to hit you,” Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, “He must be happy to hear you’re leaving.”**

**“Bullshit,” Wei Wuxian replied, “I’m telling you, these disciples all like me very much. No one wants me to leave.” He glanced at him, then hurried forward, “Shijie, am I right?”**

**“Yes,” She smiled indulgently, “Our A-Xian is everyone’s favorite.” She patted his head.**

**“Let me ask you, why did you only say farewell to Lan Zhan among so many disciples?” Jiang Cheng demanded.**

**“Can’t I admire his talents?” Wei Wuxian asked, “You are all losers to me. I desire equality. He is my match. It is not easy.”**

Admiration and equality weren’t love.

Nie Mingjue caught his little brother leaning in to whisper something to Lady Luo again. He could tell they believed Wei Wuxian loved Lan Wangji, but he couldn’t see it. Wei Wuxian barely accepted Lan Wangji as his friend before they were married in the Lan way. He was the one to call them soulmates, a matched pair, but he said so publicly, shamelessly.

He couldn’t mean it romantically. Neither of the Jiang siblings would be so calm if he did.

**“Aren’t you ashamed?” Jiang Cheng swiped at his head.**

**He dodged, “Who should be ashamed? The one who picks a fight first. I was talking about you.” He jabbed his chest.**

**Jiang Yanli stepped between them, “Come on, you two. Fighting is forbidden here. Behave well. Play at Lotus Pier. Hm?”**

**“Yes,” Wei Wuxian agreed, “I know. I won’t hit him.” He reached around to smack his shoulder.**

**“Wei Wuxian!” He gave chase, “Stop!” They ran towards the pillar, “Stop! How can you hit me?”**

**“You two,” Jiang Yanli pleaded, “Stop it.”**

**Wei Wuxian ran back and grabbed her, “Shijie, look at him.”**

**“Fine, fine,” Jiang Fengmian interrupted, “Stop now.”**

**“Stop.” Wei Wuxian held up a hand, then pretended to stroke a beard in an imitation of Lan Qiren, “Noise is forbidden here. Jiang Cheng. What are you doing?” Then he stuck his tongue out and went running.**

**“A-jie, look at him!” Jiang Cheng chased.**

It was such normal behavior from such important people.

That was the price for position, though, wasn't it? They could never just be children. Jiang Yanli was never just an older sister, she was also a Lady and the fiancée to the Jin Sect Heir. Jiang Wanyin was never just the little brother, he was the future leader of his Sect.

The minor Sects whispered to each other. There were so many children born both during and immediately after the war. Everyone wanted to ensure their line would continue, especially when they saw the major Sects brought low. But after destruction came the chance to rebuild, to change.

Did they want their children to be great or happy?

It seemed they could not be both.

They looked at the current heroes in the hall with them, and couldn't help but compare them to their past selves. Sandu Shengshou was a great man, but he sat alone on his throne in Lotus Pier, both siblings he so obviously loved no longer by his side, the woman he loved in exile.

Hanguang-Jun was unparalleled, yet to be as great as he was, he gave up on love. He was lonely at the top.

Even Chifeng-Zun, the one who led them to victory, took no joy in it. His rage was not lessened no matter how many Wens fell to it. They all knew his temper would only worsen until he succumbed to the fate every Nie Sect Leader had before.

As much as they envied their positions, they realized they did not want to be them.

What did it say about their society if none of them wanted to be like those they praised as the best?

**Lan Wangji watched them from a distance. Lan Xichen came to his side, “After he leaves, this place will be as quiet as before.” Lan Wangji looked down slightly, “Wangji. Are you going to tell Wei-gongzi that you're leaving for the Yin Iron?”**

**“No,” Lan Wangji answered shortly, then walked away.**

“There might be something to that soulmate connection,” Nie Huaisang muttered.

He thought it was the perfect thing to focus on to keep this a little more light-hearted.

It was getting ridiculous. Er-ge hadn't told him Hanguang-Jun was leaving. The former Sect Leader Jiang didn't know the specifics in order to send Wei-xiong to assist. Hanguang-Jun himself didn't ask Wei-xiong, either because he was still embarrassed by the depth of his emotions or some stupidly noble reason like keeping him out of danger.

Or maybe Wei-xiong was better at reading Lans than he thought.

Leave it to him to be uncannily observant about things useful to him and then completely clueless about everything else.

**Wei Wuxian left his family to go to one of the guest rooms. He knocked on the door, “Wen Ning.” When there was no answer, he knocked twice more, each time repeating the name, “I’m coming in,” He announced, opening the doors. He looked around the pristine room before pouting, “He’s gone.”**

**The next scene showed Wei Wuxian sitting on one of the back hills, a bunny in his lap. He picked it up and cradled it in front of his face, “Little rabbit. Pets are not allowed in Cloud Recesses. Thus I can only hide you here. Are you happy living here?” He raised his voice, “Happy.” Then giggled, “Okay. I’m pleased to hear that.”**

The future Yiling Patriarch cuddled with bunnies?

“You went back for the rabbits?” Nie Mingjue couldn’t believe it. They were fearsome cultivators. Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian took down the Xuanwu of Slaughter, a beast of legend, with just the two of them. Wei Wuxian brought Wen Ruohan to heel on his own.

How were they so soft?

“We were concerned for their safety without Lan Yi,” Xichen’s little brother said with a straight face.

“Pets are not allowed in Cloud Recesses,” Lan Qiren repeated.

“I suppose they are not quite pets,” Xichen considered the matter, “They were Lan Yi’s companions. It would be disrespectful to abandon them.”

The esteemed elder looked close to a Qi deviation again, but said nothing.

“I wanna pet the bunnies,” A Lan Sect cultivator whispered.

His companions agreed. As soon as they returned home, they would find where in the back hills Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun had hidden their warren. To pay their respects to Lan Yi’s memory, of course. And if these adorable little creatures were to be the only pets on the mountain, they would be the best treated pets ever.

**He stroked it and moved it back to his lap, “Little rabbits, should I take you back to Lotus Pier?” He wondered to himself, then shook his head, “No. If Lan Zhan feels lonely one day and comes here, he won’t be able to find you. However...” He thought back to what he overheard, “Little rabbits, where will he go by himself?”**

**His eyes widened when he realized. He lifted the rabbit back to face him, “Will he go search for the Yin Iron alone? Huh? You think so?”**

“He figured it out by talking to the rabbits,” Jiang Wanyin deadpanned.

“Special rabbits,” Nie Huaisang pointed out.



“Because that makes sense.”

**Wei Wuxian sighed and looked away, “Lan Zhan, you stubborn guy. You were all present that day. You should have seen it all. In the name of my grandmaster, we found the Yin Iron together!”**

**He shook the rabbit, “Now he is going to search for it, leaving me alone.” He looked at the other rabbits, “You guys judge for yourselves. Isn’t he being disloyal to his friends?” He huffed again.**

Lan Wangji should have just asked him.

The Yin Iron was dangerous. It was a matter to be taken seriously, and he didn’t know back then if Wei Ying was capable of being serious. He also didn’t trust himself to remain completely focused with the walking distraction that was Wei Ying.

If he’d known how desperately he wanted a connection to his mother, he would have asked.

There was so much about Wei Ying he didn’t know, so many questions he never thought to ask. Wei Ying didn’t know everything about him. He supposed he didn’t have to know him completely to love him.

**“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng walked into the small clearing with the rabbits.**

**“Shijie,” He rose.**

**“How cute!” She smiled, crouching down to pick one up.**

**“What are you doing here?” Jiang Cheng asked.**

**“None of your business,” Wei Wuxian replied.**

**“As an upright gentleman, it’s embarrassing for you to hold rabbits,” He scolded.**

**“Yes,” Wei Wuxian drawled, holding the rabbit closer to his face, “As an upright gentleman, how embarrassing for me to hold a rabbit!” As he spoke, he threw the rabbit at his brother.**

**Jiang Cheng caught it and immediately cradled it, “How dare you!” He then sank down to pet it.**

**“Little rabbit,” Wei Wuxian sat down and picked up another one.**

**“Da-ge...” Nie Huaisang leaned forward, “Can I steal some of the Lan’s bunnies?”**

**“No!”**

**“Why not?” The smaller man whined, “I’ll keep them with the birds.”**

**“They belong to the Lan.”**

“Then can I get unrelated bunnies?”

“No!”

MianMian bit her lip to stop herself from laughing. Just because they were cultivators who spent their time facing down and eliminating demonic entities didn't mean they couldn't appreciate the softer things in life. It didn't make them weaker to cuddle adorable animals. If anything, it was further proof of Wei Wuxian's kindness.

And Sect Leader Jiang's secret soft side.

**“Why do you keep these little ones?” Jiang Cheng asked, “Is it because...you want to eat them?”**

**Wei Wuxian covered his rabbit's ears, “What are you talking about, Jiang Cheng? They shouldn't hear such words.” Jiang Yanli laughed, and Jiang Cheng stroked his apologetically, “I found them accidentally.”**

**“You can't keep pets in Cloud Recesses,” Jiang Cheng reminded him, “Where did you find them?”**

**“None of your business,” Wei Wuxian evaded. Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, but went back to playing with his rabbit. He turned towards them, “Shijie, if you like, we can take one back.”**

**She shook her head, “If we take one back, we will separate it from its family and loved ones. How can it be happy then?”**

How could anyone be happy separated from their loved ones?

Jin Zixuan stopped considering where he could put a rabbit hutch in Koi Tower. Did everything foreshadow Wei Wuxian's fate? First, the story of Lan Yi, and now his wife's words. He squeezed her hand in comfort.

He would find a way to bring her brother home.

**“Right,” Wei Wuxian agreed.**

**They continued to pet the rabbits, then Jiang Yanli decided, “Well, it's getting late. Let's go back.”**

**“Alright,” He held up his rabbit again, “Little rabbit, we have to go now.” He rubbed their noses together, then set it back in the brush.**

**They were barely gone before Lan Wangji walked by the back hill. He looked at the gathered rabbits hopping around, “Farewell.”**

“Of course he said goodbye to the rabbits as well.”

“Isn't it sweet?”

“How unexpected of Hanguang-Jun.”

**It was night at Cloud Recesses, and Lan Xichen sat alone in front of an incense burner. He stared forward for a moment, before saying, “Wen-gongzi. Since you are here, please come in.”**

**The Dire Owl swooped down, and Wen Chao walked in, “Amazing hearing, Lan-zongzhu.” He started walking around the room.**

**Lan Xichen was unfazed, “You came at such a late hour, what can I do for you, Wen-gongzi?”**

**Wen Chao wiped his boots on his mat, smearing mud around, “Ah, Wen Qing told me the back hill of the Lan Sect is strictly guarded. Is there any treasure hidden there?”**

**“The back hill is where our ancestors lay,” Lan Xichen lied without lying, “We guard it in case it is offended by strangers.”**

**“If so, I’d like to offer some sacrifices for your ancestors,” Wen Chao offered, “May I be allowed in, Lan-zongzhu?”**

**“Wen-gongzi,” Lan Xichen looked at him, “Please leave.”**

Zewu-Jun was so cool. Even though Wen Chao didn’t make idle threats, he didn’t react to any of them. He didn’t allow the second son of Wen Ruohan to overstep, even if his request wasn’t unreasonable.

It was tense, and that tension wouldn’t go away until the war started.

**“Lan Xichen, don’t think we can’t do anything because you’re powerful,” Wen Chao threatened.**

**Lan Xichen just smiled and closed his eyes.**

**Wen Chao moved closer, leaning down, “Although I can do nothing now, don’t forget that Lan Wangji just set off without any company.” Lan Xichen’s face didn’t move, but his hand clenched on his knee. Wen Chao laughed and left, shouting as he did so, “Lan Xichen, turn in the Yin Iron as soon as possible so your clan will survive!”**

**Lan Xichen looked down, “Wangji, please take care.”**

“So he was after us from the beginning,” Nie Huaisang muttered.

“Me,” Lan Wangji corrected, “After me.”

“How did you end up with them, Huaisang?” Jin Guangyao asked, “You were supposed to meet up with me.”

“Ah, you’ll see,” Nie Huaisang waved his hand, “I’m more interested in how Jiang-xiong found us.”

“Wen Qing told me where to find you,” Jiang Wanyin grimaced, “I ran into her by chance.”

“Chance or destiny?” Nie Huaisang grinned.

As Jiang Yanli said, she could not control her destiny.

None of them could. None of this was up to them.

Hopefully, destiny wouldn't be crueler than it already had been.

## Chapter End Notes

Guess who started classes this week? Me! And I'm sure, many of you as well. This could work either two ways. Updates may slow down because I have schoolwork. They might also speed up because I stress-write, and school is stressful.

Thank you to everyone who has left kudos! I couldn't believe this already got over 500! Also, your comments are appreciated and incredibly helpful!

# One's Company, Two's a Crowd, Three's a Party

## Chapter Summary

This is a dangerous quest...could be a honeymoon...could also be a day out with the boys.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

**It cut to the next morning. Jiang Cheng glared down at a note, “Wei Wuxian, you fool! Bastard. How can he leave without saying goodbye?”**

Wei Wuxian couldn't say anything about the quest because it was a Lan Sect secret, so he just left in the middle of the night.

He didn't care what it looked like to those who cared about him most.

**“What happened?” Jiang Fengmian inquired.**

**“A-die, look at this.” He handed the note over. After letting him read it, he added, “A-die, I'll go and bring him back.”**

**“No need,” Jiang Fengmian stopped him, “Let's head back to Yunmeng first.”**

**“Why?” Jiang Cheng demanded, “How can we leave him alone?”**

**“Don't worry,” Jiang Yanli grabbed his arm, “A-Xian knows what to do. He left without saying goodbye. There must have been an urgent situation.”**

**“What could be so urgent?” Jiang Cheng complained.**

**“Get ready,” Jiang Fengmian said, “Let's leave first.”**

And of course, with the former Jiang Sect Leader knowing about the Yin Iron as well, no one was sent after him.

“We should really work on our communication,” Huaisang muttered, “All these secrets just seem unnecessary.”

“Everyone has a right to their secrets,” Nie Mingjue argued.

“Even when their secrets impact others?” His younger brother asked, “Was I better off not knowing? Were any of us safer?”

He couldn't say they were, but he also knew this was about much more than Wei Wuxian keeping his little brother in the dark about danger. Ever since the sworn brotherhood ceremony, Huaisang had been trying to convince him to tell his sworn brothers the real reason those in the Nie Sect died early of Qi deviation.

So he didn't answer. What they did wasn't true demonic cultivation, but it involved the use of resentful energy. With tensions this high about the Yiling Patriarch and Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation, any revelation would be taken poorly.

Even though Jin Guangyao shared his memories, he was still suspicious of him.

**It switched to Lan Wangji walking down a dock. He was dressed in his light blue travelling robes. He didn't make it to the end before he was forced to pause and catch a loquat. He glanced at it as Wei Wuxian jogged closer, "Lan Zhan!"**

**"Boring," Lan Wangji responded.**

**Wei Wuxian caught up all the way, "Lan Zhan. How could you break your promise? We promised to share our chivalric duty. How could you leave alone?" Silence, "Could it be that you're afraid I'd steal your spotlight in punishing the evil and aiding the weak?" He laughed, "I didn't expect that you people from the Lan Sect could be so petty."**

**"Boring," Lan Wangji repeated.**

**"Huh?" Wei Wuxian stopped walking, "What did you say?" He charged after him, "I'm boring?"**

"You could at least be grateful," Jiang Wanyin glowered at him.

Lan Wangji inclined his head. He didn't like Jiang Wanyin's attitude, nor could he approve of his actions towards Wei Ying, but he wasn't so arrogant not to see his own faults. He pushed Wei Ying away at every opportunity early in their acquaintance. Was it so surprising the other would start pushing him away as well?

He wished he were better with words, but what could he say? That Wei Ying confused him? That he'd never felt the same about anyone else? That he was scared of his own heart because of where it led his father? How he constantly had to battle back the feeling of possession because Wei Ying was not his?

Might not ever be his?

He couldn't say anything like that. He didn't want to influence Wei Ying's decisions with his feelings.

**From a distance, Wen Qing watched with Wen Chao, a Dire Owl on his arm. He flexed and sent it flying over the river. Wen Qing worriedly looked at Wen Chao, then the boat carrying the two young men.**

Everyone snapped to attention.

It was easy for Wen Qing to help the Jiang and Lan when it was only her and her brother against the Waterborne Abyss. Now, she was under the direct supervision of Wen Chao. Her brother was nowhere in sight.

Would she go along with her Sect's actions, or would she oppose them?

**"Lan Zhan. Wait for me!" Wei Wuxian complained as it skipped to them walking. He stopped, watching him continue walking. Then he grinned and traced a talisman in the air. He sent it towards the other, and it created a cord of spiritual energy attached to Lan Wangji's wrist. This forced him to turn back.**

**"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian tugged on it, yanking Lan Wangji's arm back. He giggled, "This is my self-made talisman. It can keep people within four meters. How about it? Is it fun?" Lan Wangji looked away. He continued, "What should I name it? Should it be binding?" He moved his arm to the side, "Or bonding?" He moved it further back, "Maybe neither. How about calling it..."**

**"Boring," Lan Wangji decided, pulling him forward.**

"How can you think it's boring?" Nie Huaisang asked, "It was obviously inspired by your wedding!"

"Maybe he should call it Marriage," Jin Zixuan mused.

"They are not married," Lan Qiren snapped.

A few snickered around the room at the esteemed elder's rage. It was funny to think Hanguang-Jun would need his uncle's protection from anything. Especially matters of the heart.

**"Lan Zhan! Wait!" He jogged to catch up.**

**Before he could say anything, the pouch lit up. Lan Wangji looked down at it, "The Yin Iron is responding."**

**"Maybe it has sensed something," Wei Wuxian guessed.**

**Lan Wangji looked around, "There may be another Yin Iron shard nearby."**

**Wei Wuxian also examined their surroundings, "You mean here?"**

**Lan Wangji nodded, then noticed his hesitation, "What?"**

**Wei Wuxian shook his head, "Nevermind."**

"What was that about?"

The Nie Sect disciples guessed they were close to Tanzhou, which was on the route to Qinghe. If Wei Wuxian knew that, then he knew it was possible to run into Nie Huaisang. They were all eager to see how their lazy, cowardly Sect Heir ended up on such a dangerous

quest. Did Wei Wuxian seek him out? Why would he, when he wouldn't bring his own brother along?

What a good friend he must be to the young master if he knew his route home!

**It skipped to them walking through the marketplace at Tanzhou. Lan Wangji kept a sedate pace while Wei Wuxian whirled around excitedly. He looked through a few items, then picked up a mask. He hastily paid then ran after his companion, "Lan Zhan!"**

**Lan Wangji's only reaction to the mask was a slight widening of his eyes.**

A few snickered. It wasn't much of a reaction, but it was a reaction.

It was something Nie Huaisang would do.

**Wei Wuxian laughed anyways, "Scared?"**

**He didn't notice someone sneaking up behind him, "Wei Wuxian," They said in an obviously fake voice.**

**They jumped at him when he turned around, and Wei Wuxian shouted. Nie Huaisang laughed, pulling the mask off his face and adjusting his hair.**

A few joined in his laughter, surprised at the Nie Sect Heir's appearance.

Jin Guangyao wasn't surprised. He remembered how much Huaisang wanted to invite his friends to the Unclean Realm. Jiang Fengmian and Madame Yu refused each request, but the young man would tell him countless stories of going to Lotus Pier during the winter when he was younger.

Yungmeng was much warmer than Qinghe, after all, and a much better place for someone with a weak disposition to spend the harsher months of winter.

But they couldn't remain youths forever. As they got older, they had more responsibilities. Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang began their training to be the next Sect Leaders, and Wei Wuxian assumed the role of head disciple.

He was just surprised that such a desire to have his friends around made him overcome his cowardice. He remembered well walking into the Chang Sect's residence to all the corpses. This was no easy quest.

Huaisang only told them about the Chang massacre. Everything else was forgotten in the face of the Wen's attack and Huaisang's summons to indoctrination.

**"Nie Huaisang!" Wei Wuxian scolded, "Why are you here?"**

**"Upon hearing that laughter, I knew it was you, Wei-xiong." Nie Huaisang tapped his chest with his fan.**



**“Nie-xiong,” Wei Wuxian wrapped an arm around his shoulders, “Didn’t you tell your Nie-zongzhu you would return to Qinghe once the lecture was over?”**

**Nie Huaisang opened his fan, “Wei-xiong, you are the same. Shouldn’t you have returned to Lotus Pier with your Jiang-zongzhu?”**

**They stepped away and pointed at each other, “You arrogant guy.” They laughed.**

**Nie Huaisang finally noticed who they were with, “Ah...he...” Wei Wuxian turned to check, and Lan Wangji turned away.**

“Is he jealous?” MianMian murmured to her friend.

Sect Leader Nie snorted, but Nie Huaisang just gasped, “Oh, that explains so much.”

“You shouldn’t let Wei Wuxian cling to you like that,” The older brother half-heartedly scolded, “It gives people the wrong idea.”

“But Wei-xiong already rejected me,” Nie Huaisang pouted, uncaring of the eavesdroppers now choking on their drinks. MianMian could tell he wasn’t being serious, but she benefitted too much from his smuggling during their studies at Cloud Recesses to ever fall for his jokes. His sense of humor was nearly as bad, if not worse, than Wei Wuxian’s.

“You what?!” Sect Leader Nie shouted, drawing more attention to them.

“Ah,” Nie Huaisang fluttered his fan nervously, wilting a little, “I’m sure it’ll come up.”

MianMian nodded, moving so she was slightly more in between the brothers. It was no secret to her that Nie Huaisang feared many things, but he feared his brother’s wrath the most. She was nearly certain the Sect Leader wouldn’t physically harm his little brother, but words could hurt just as much as blows.

**Wei Wuxian grabbed his arm, “Don’t be nervous. It’s okay.”**

**“He is the-”**

**“Let’s talk along the way.” He wrapped his arm around him to pull him along.**

**It switched to Jiang Cheng trying to sneak out of Lotus Pier without being caught.**

**He was unsuccessful, “A-Cheng.” Jiang Yanli called out. Jiang Cheng slowly turned around to face his sister, bowing his head. She said, “Be careful.”**

**He looked up and smiled. He nodded and turned away.**

Jin Zixuan was becoming intimately familiar with the feeling of being left out.

It never bothered him before. He was grateful to have missed the incident with the Waterborne Abyss. Those who went mostly survived because they were in tune with each

others' tells, responding immediately where he would have been confused. He was also happy to miss the beating that came from their night of drinking.

But this was detrimental to him. These were the four who stood by his side at indoctrination. They understood the danger they were in because they'd already faced some of that danger. Meanwhile, he nearly got himself killed because he was oblivious to all of it. He knew nothing about the Yin Iron, or the Wen Sect's true ambitions.

Maybe there was an argument here for better communication between Sects.

The easiest way to facilitate communication was to have inter-Sect friendships. Instead of standing alone, they could stand together.

**It quickly went back to the trio in Tanzhou. Nie Huaisang asked, "Why are you with Lan-er-gongzi?" He smacked his chest, "I thought you two were incompatible."**

**"It's a long story," Wei Wuxian evaded.**

**Nie Huaisang gasped, "Oh, I got it. This must be a punishment from Grandmaster Lan. You must have violated their family rules again."**

Lan Xichen frowned, "That's the second time you've assumed we've punished him."

Once, he could overlook. It was concerning Huaisang thought Wei Wuxian and Wangji's disappearance was punishment related, but he also knew Huaisang's imagination could run away with him. So soon after the previous punishment, it wasn't outside the realm of possibility for Wei Wuxian to have done something else worthy of punishment.

This, however, was. Wei Wuxian was past their authority to punish as soon as Jiang Fengmian showed up.

And Jiang Fengmian wouldn't let Wei Wuxian be punished unreasonably...right?

"Hm," Huaisang's face was mostly hidden behind his fan, "Wei-xiong got punished a lot."

"I'm sure it was well-deserved," Uncle commented.

Huaisang's eyes narrowed for a moment, "If you believe people should be punished for who they are, sure."

"Huaisang," Mingjue warned.

The smaller man sighed, "Do you punish a fish because it can't fly?"

Lan Xichen felt himself grimace. Wei Wuxian was unrestrained. It seemed that was unchangeable no matter who tried to change it, be it Madame Yu, Lan Qiren, or Jiang Wanyin. Likewise, Huaisang would never be as fearless as his brother, no matter how hard those around him pushed. Wei Wuxian accepted Huaisang for who he was.

Perhaps he was reading too deep into things. Even he'd heard of Madame Yu's rejection of Wei Wuxian, but surely it didn't extend into unfair punishments. There was no reason for Huaisang to be so...defensive.

**Wei Wuxian hit him, "Our relationship is much better now."**

**They stopped, noticing a crowd gathering in the courtyard. Nie Huaisang pointed with his fan, "What's that?"**

**"Let's have a look?" Wei Wuxian grinned.**

**"Let's go." Nie Huaisang tossed his mask away.**

**Wei Wuxian stopped at Lan Wangji's side, "Lan Zhan, why aren't you going there?"**

**"No way," He refused, "It's too crowded."**

**Wei Wuxian examined the crowd again, then laughed, "It's okay. It's not that crowded. Come on. Let's have a look." He nodded, then grabbed his wrist and dragged him along, "Let's go." They ran, "Come on."**

Ah, Wei Wuxian was truly one of a kind. Before his fall from righteousness, he made a good compliment to Hanguang-Jun. He forced him out of his comfort zone, forced him to interact with more people. He saw Hanguang-Jun's resolution to be alone and completely disregarded it.

There was little wonder Hanguang-Jun fell in love. Even if Wei Wuxian just seemed to consider him a friend...what a pair they would have made, in a better life.

**Nie Huaisang tapped someone to get their attention, "Hey, sir, what are you looking at? What happened?" He jumped a few times, but couldn't see the sign.**

**"You don't know?" The man asked, "This is an invitation. Lately, the seclusive Lady Florist has been inviting all the cultivators to her mansion for a poetry recital. If any cultivator who is elegant and brilliant in poetry attends, Lady Florist will greet and treat him in person."**

A few cultivators sighed.

What happened to Lady Florist was a tragedy. They hadn't known it was connected to the Yin Iron and Xue Yang. It did little to soothe their anger to know it now.

Xue Yang was still out there.

Yes, there were rumors that Wei Wuxian stole the Yin Iron off Xue Yang while he was in custody, but it was hard to imagine this young man doing any sort of crime. Perhaps he hunted down Xue Yang later. Maybe their search for the delinquent was useless.

Or maybe the Stygian Tiger Amulet was made of something more powerful.

**“Lady Florist...” Nie Huaisang repeated thoughtfully, “I remember that I read about her in The Florist Lady and The Flower Phantom.” He opened his fan, “In a garden in Tanzhou, lives a lady florist who often recites poems by the moonlight. If someone’s poems can move her, they will be granted a flower. The flower lasts for three years, and its aroma will remain forever.”**

**“Nie-xiong.” Wei Wuxian pulled him closer, and the fan shut, “You are so talented, but as for the homework assigned by Grandmaster Lan.” He poked him repeatedly, “You couldn’t even recall a word of that. However, you are really good at such things.” He stole the fan and started fanning his face.**

**“Wei-xiong,” Nie Huaisang placed his hands on his hips, “Aren’t you the same?”**

Only interested in what they were passionate about.

The type of people where passion led to obsession.

Lan Qiren scowled. The more he saw of Wei Wuxian’s talismans, the more he wondered if the demon was ever truly on the righteous path. There was nothing wrong with talismans, but they were a supplement. They weren’t meant to be the foundation.

Theoretically, anyone could use a talisman once they understood its components. Even non-cultivators could use them if they put their minds to it. Though perhaps that was why talismans were disregarded as an area of study. Too many charlatans made too many outlandish claims, disgracing the entire field.

It wasn’t heresy, but it wasn’t traditional either.

**Suddenly, flower petals started falling from the sky, “Wei-xiong, look!”**

**They all admired the petals. Wei Wuxian used the fan to shield his face and catch a few, giving them to Nie Huaisang. The smaller man’s gaze drifted to Lan Wangji, and he shook his head sadly, “Lan-er-gongzi, is nothing but an unparalleled, gorgeous, and elegant gentleman.”**

**Wei Wuxian stared at Lan Wangji, “I agree, but he’s always in white. It’s like someone died.”**

**Nie Huaisang gave him a blank look as he took his fan back. He went back to looking at the petals, but Wei Wuxian continued to stare at Lan Wangji. His smile spread into something softer, more genuine. Nie Huaisang nudged him and started pointing things out.**

Jiang Yanli smiled at his obliviousness. She supposed it was hard to notice if A-Xian was attracted to Hanguang-Jun when everyone admired his beauty.

“Is Nie Huaisang a cutsleeve?” Someone whispered behind her.

“I heard he once tried to court Wei Wuxian,” Someone else replied.

Her smile froze, and she glanced towards Nie Huaisang. Just like herself, the small man was limited in what he could do. He wasn't able to fight to protect his loved ones, so his actions, when he chose to act, tended to be subtle.

He let A-Xian cling to him because, at Lotus Pier, if A-Xian was near Nie Huaisang, A-Niang wouldn't punish him.

The Nie Sect wondered why their young master ended up on a dangerous quest. She had her answer in Nie Huaiang's question. A-Xian couldn't tell him everything, so he assumed this was a punishment. Until he knew the truth, he wouldn't leave them alone together.

Nie Huaisang couldn't fight Hanguang-Jun, but his position made others hesitate. It wasn't protection in a way others would understand, but it was the best he could give.

**Then the Yin Iron started acting up again.**

**When they went to the Florist's Mansion, they found it desolated, "It seems we are late again," Wei Wuxian observed.**

**Nie Huaisang examined his surroundings, then bent down to pick up a feather. He looked to the other two, "The Dire Owl."**

**They exchanged looks, "It's Wen Chao."**

**"Wen Chao has been here," Nie Huaisang repeated.**

This was where Nie Huaisang should have made his excuses and left.

There was nothing he could do to help. He wasn't a strong cultivator, nor did the Nie Sect have any helpful insights into the Yin Iron. They certainly never had a piece.

The sight of the ruined mansion should have sent him running.

**It skipped to them on the road again, "Now, I see," Nie Huaisang said, "The Yin Iron depraved the peony, the leading flower, and the true Lady Florist was held in captivity. The fake one invited all the cultivators to find the other shards of the Yin Iron."**

**"True," Wei Wuxian replied.**

**"Wei-xiong," Nie Huaisang frowned, "Is the Yin Iron really so powerful?"**

**"Of course," Wei Wuxian answered, "How about letting Lan-er-gongzi show you his?"**

**"No. No need," Nie Huaisang refused before he even finished, "Wei-xiong, we have a shard of the Yin Iron. Isn't it very dangerous?"**

We.

There was no persuasion. Wei Wuxian offered him some closer version of the truth, and Nie Huaisang didn't run away like he had at the story of the demon snakes. He didn't want to see

the Yin Iron, but he didn't seem in any hurry to leave.

'We' suggested he already made his mind up about joining their quest.

**"Ah. Not we," Wei Wuxian gestured, "It's Lan Zhan and I."**

**Nie Huaisang hit him with his fan, "Wei-xiong."**

**"Lan Zhan and I," Wei Wuxian insisted.**

**"You should at least return to Qinghe with me," Nie Huaisang complained, "Look how dangerous it is along the road. I'm..." While his back was turned, the other two continued further down the road. Noticing the gap, he ran after them, "Wei-xiong! Wei-xiong!"**

**Lan Wangji suddenly sent his sword flying, disturbing a Dire Owl from its perch.**

**"The Dire Owl," Wei Wuxian exclaimed, "Again."**

**"Hurry," Lan Wangji ordered.**

**"Wei-xiong! Are you going to Qinghe or not?" Nie Huaisang shouted after him. When they didn't respond, he started running after them, "Wei-xiong! Wait for me!"**

"He tried to leave you behind," Nie Mingjue couldn't believe it, "He told you it was dangerous, and you voluntarily followed him. You chased him down."

"Wei-xiong wouldn't let anything happen to me," Huaisang answered.

He straightened at the implication, "I wouldn't let anything happen to you."

Several of his disciples voiced their agreement. Huaisang felt comfortable with Wei Wuxian but none of them? Huaisang would hide in his room rather than join them on night hunts, but he ran off with the head disciple of another Sect? Yes, they were childhood friends, but what made him more trustworthy than the rest of them?

Nie Mingjue prayed his brother wasn't secretly in love with Wei Wuxian. He could not handle that.

"Not even to test me?" His little brother asked, "Or force me to use my saber?"

At that, a few of them faltered. They wouldn't let anything happen to him, but they would let some things almost happen to him. He couldn't hide behind them forever. He needed to learn to protect himself.

"Wei-xiong is, at his core, a protector," Huaisang claimed.

Jiang Wanyin scoffed, "Even if you don't ask for his protection."

Nearby, Wen Qing approached Wen Chao as he was admiring his own piece of the Yin Iron. She saluted, **“Gongzi, His Excellency has ordered that, since nothing’s been happening in Yueyang for days, we should hurry there as soon as possible to help Xue Yang.”**

His hand clenched around it, **“Help? Xue Yang is nothing. He is not worthy of my help.”**

**“I’m just transmitting the order,”** Wen Qing avoided direct eye contact.

**“Don’t put on an act before me,”** He leaned on his sword, **“You think I don’t know? You just don’t want me to cause trouble for Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji. Why? After months of lecturing, you got attached to them? A word of advice. Don’t intimidate me with His Excellency!”**

If Wen Chao weren’t such a-

Jiang Cheng cut off his own thoughts, forcing down his rage. Wen Qing tried to do the right thing, but her hands were tied. She couldn’t depend on her family.

He understood well how terrifying it was to stand alone.

His hands curled into fists. If only he had convinced her to go to Qinghe with them. They could have found a way to hide her. They could have rescued Wen Ning when they went to Indoctrination. She would have been safe.

But if she were safe in Qinghe, who would have saved them after Lotus Pier was attacked?

It was as though they were made to suffer and survive.

**“Once I get the Yin Iron from Lan Wangji, plus the one I got from Lady Florist, I’ll contribute the most to His Excellency.”** He sneered, **“Xue Yang, who only has one shard, is no match for me.”** Wen Qing didn’t react, **“Oh, I might have forgotten if you weren’t here. Dafan Mountain is where you were born, right?”**

**“What do you want?”** She snapped.

**“I want nothing, but on their way to Qinghe, Wei Wuxian and his companions will definitely pass by this place,”** Wen Chao replied.

**“His Excellency has promised me,”** She stared him down, **“None of my people will be harmed again.”**

“Again,” Jin Zixuan noted.

He admired her stoicness. If he couldn’t read Jiang Wanyin as well as he could, he wouldn’t have noted her fear. She was walking the fine line between protecting her people, and saving Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun. It was too bad Wen Chao saw through her threats of going to Wen Ruohan.

Then again, Wen Chao was trying to prove something to his father. How many times had he and the other heirs done something reckless to prove themselves?

**He shushed her, “Don’t worry. As long as you listen to me, nobody will get into trouble.” He stepped closer to her, “Let’s pay a visit to that cannibal monster.” Then he walked away.**

“Cannibal monster?” Lan Xichen asked, his voice tilting up in concern.

“Oh,” Nie Huaisang fluttered his fan, “That.”

“You didn’t mention a cannibal monster,” Jin Guangyao set down his cup.

“So much happened at Dafan Mountain,” Nie Huaisang huffed, “The cannibal monster was the least of our concerns.”

Jiang Wanyin snorted, “I missed a cannibal monster?”

“Apparently,” Jin Zixuan muttered.

**It skipped to Wen Qing and their retinue in a tavern. She was obviously distracted by his words, as she didn’t notice her cup overflowing with wine until one of her men pointed it out. She’d barely brought her cup to her lips when Jiang Cheng walked in.**

**“Waiter,” He didn’t notice her, “Are there any fine rooms left?”**

**“Yes,” The waiter nodded.**

**Jiang Cheng turned around to see Wen Qing looking at him. His expression brightened a little, “Wen-guniang, why are you here?”**

It was adorable how the normally surly young man brightened in the presence of his crush.

What were the odds they would run into each other on the road?

But here presented another test. She already tried to divert Wen Chao’s attention to save Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji. She failed.

Wen Chao wasn’t there anymore, and she was faced with Jiang Wanyin. There was no way for her to ignore him. Would she try again to save them? Or would the presence of the Wen disciples, likely loyal to Wen Chao, stop her? Would the threat to her people force her into silence?

**She didn’t answer, and he dimmed as he sat at the table next to her, “Waiter, two buns, please.”**

**As the waiter hurried to obey, Wen Qing spoke up, “Waiter, two buns too, please.”**

**Never one to back down from a competition, Jiang Cheng continued, “Waiter, a pot of White Pearl Flower.”**



**“Waiter, a pot of White Pear Flower, too,” Wen Qing ordered.**

**He slammed his money down, “Waiter, hurry up.”**

**She quickly copied him, “Serve ours first.”**

**He looked at her, then deflated, “Waiter, let them have that then.”**

**“We don’t want it now,” Wen Qing said, “Throw it away.”**

People exchanged glances. Was she deliberately provoking him?

**Jiang Cheng got up, “What do you mean? Are you making fun of me?”**

**She rose and approached him, “The QishanWen are deliberately making fun of you. So what?” He held her gaze, then huffed and retrieved his belongings. She reached out to grab his shoulder, “Stop there.”**

**He hit her hand away. The Wen disciples all drew their blades as Jiang Cheng grabbed her arm and pulled her closer. She whispered, “Dafan Mountain. Wei Wuxian is in danger.”**

**His eyes widened at the warning, then he nodded, “Much obliged.”**

**She shoved him out the door, then stopped her men, “Nevermind him.” They moved back to their seats as she smiled softly.**

**“So she did help you,” Lan Xichen felt a wave of sympathy.**

**“She tried her best,” Wangji almost frowned.**

She tried her best, but she was only one woman against Wen Ruohan. One doctor at that, not a fighter. He wondered, had she remained stationed in Qishan instead of Yiling, if she would have ended up acting as a spy. If Jiang Wanyin or Wei Wuxian asked, he couldn’t say she would refuse them. It was obvious she cared for them more than her Sect’s ambitions.

Would she and A-Yao have worked together? Could she have found a way to kill Wen Ruohan sooner?

**Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji, and Nie Huaisang approached a village. Wei Wuxian smiled, “Look, there is an old woman. Let’s ask her. Maybe we can stay somewhere for the night.” He jogged forward, “Popo. We are passing through, and we’re in need of a place to rest.” She trembled, “Can we stay at your place for the night?”**

**She didn’t respond, so he leaned closer, “Popo?” Still no response, so he glanced at his friends. He raised his voice, “Popo. We need to find a place to sleep here.” He held his sword between his legs and pantomimed, “Sleep. Do you understand sleep? Sleep. Popo...” She finally got up, “Popo.”**

**She gestured at them to follow her.**

**Wei Wuxian laughed, “Let’s go.”**

**They followed her through the village, but Wei Wuxian hesitated. Lan Wangji paused, “What?”**

**He shook his head, “It’s hard to say. I just have a bad feeling about this place.” He exchanged looks with the others, then charged on, “Popo.”**

**“The fairy statue brings disaster and takes souls,” The elderly woman muttered, “Spirit snatch. Soul taking. Spirit snatch.”**

“How did you not realize this was a trap?” Jiang Cheng wondered.

Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes, “Obviously something was wrong, but what was I going to do? Convince Wei-xiong and Hanguang-Jun not to investigate?”

He had a point there. The old woman was terrified. Sometimes, in towns where there wasn’t a cultivation Sect, the people would hide when they saw cultivators. They thought their presence invited evil. There were a few times when he himself walked silently with whatever brave villager was elected to lead him and the other disciples to the danger threatening them.

Even if it was a trap, Wei Wuxian would never ignore someone so scared or a suspiciously empty village.

**“What is she talking about?” Nie Huaisang wondered.**

**“What disaster?” Wei Wuxian pondered, “What fairy? Soul taking...spirit snatch.”**

**They turned their gaze to the mountain, then continued following the elderly woman. She took them to a worn down temple. She kept muttering, “Soul taking. Soul taking.”**

**Wei Wuxian entered first, quickly followed by Nie Huaisang then Lan Wangji. They immediately spotted the giant statue that looked like a woman dancing, “That’s the fairy statue?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**Nie Huaisang moved closer, “Isn’t it an ordinary statue? Except for the ugly smiling face, nothing seems special about it. Can she really snatch someone’s spirit?”**

“Please tell me that’s not the cannibal monster,” Zewu-Jun glanced at his younger brother.

“It is,” Hanguang-Jun confirmed.

Once again, the gathered cultivators wondered what sort of demonic entity it was.

It looked like they were in a temple. Yes, it was run down, but what could possibly have happened on such sacred ground that created a demonic entity? Much less a powerful enough one to snatch spirits and eat people? Was this connected to Wen Ruohan? Was this what he did to Wen Qing’s people? Did his cruelty create a monster?

Did she grow up in the shadow of two monsters?

**An older man shuffled out, “No one has seen it snatch any spirit.”**

**“Who are you?” Nie Huaisang demanded, retreating towards his friends, “When did you arrive here?”**

**“I’m here all the time,” The man answered, “I should be the one doing the interrogation. Who are you guys?”**

**Wei Wuxian was forced to answer when the other two wouldn’t, “Sir, we are passing through here to get to our relatives in Qinghe,” He lied easily, “So we want to find a place to stay for the night.”**

Another easy lie, given for a good reason.

It was good to be forthright and honest, but there were righteous reasons for unrighteous actions.

Not to the point of excusing demonic cultivation, of course, but it was something to consider nonetheless.

**“Pass through quickly,” The man advised, “And leave soon then.”**

**Wei Wuxian glanced at Lan Wangji, who nodded and moved closer. Wei Wuxian continued, “Sir, when was the statue built?”**

**“The dancing fairy was once a blessed stone born between heaven and earth,” The man explained, turning to look at it, “Somehow, it was gradually shaped into the image of a fairy. It’s been served for a long time, but twenty years ago, the dancing fairy statue started to cause trouble. It can snatch someone’s soul. It was repressed by a grand Sect, but too many people died. This place has been getting bleaker since then.”**

**“A grand Sect?” Wei Wuxian asked, “Sir, who was the Sect Leader?”**

**“I’m old,” The man evaded, “I can’t remember.”**

**Wei Wuxian noticed that the tablet he was carrying said Wen on it, “Sir, was it the QishanWen?”**

**“I said I can’t remember,” He replied too quickly, “You want to stay for the night? You may stay here then. Maybe you will understand everything then.” He shuffled away.**

**“Ominous,” A-Xuan murmured.**

Madame Jin agreed. She was starting to admire Wen Qing herself. It took courage to stand up against one’s own Sect, and wit to do so without getting punished for it. She wouldn’t put it past Wen Ruohan to execute his own niece for treason. There was a reason the rest of her people were terrified into submission.

Yet she helped Jiang Cheng. She would accept his comb when he offered.

She would do well by his side once others saw past her name.

**Nie Huaisang waited until he was gone to speak, “Wei-xiong, I don’t feel good about this. The dancing fairy statue’s smile scares me. Do you think she can really snatch souls?”**

**Wei Wuxian poked him, “Calm down. Even if she was as mighty as a god I’d...”**

**He trailed off as the elderly woman brought in some firewood, “The night is cold. Make a bonfire.”**

**Nie Huaisang darted forward, “It won’t be cold with a bonfire.” He bowed, “Thank you, popo.”**

**She just left, and the trio settled down for the night.**

“You slept in front of a statue they told you could kill you?” Nie Mingjue demanded.

“Would you rather we slept outside where Wen Chao could attack us?” Nie Huaisang argued.

“I would rather you have met up with our disciples, like you were supposed to!” The Nie Sect Leader thundered, “Were you even useful?”

Nie Huaisang flinched.

Luo Qingyang shifted more to act as a wall between the brothers.

**Nie Huaisang’s yelling woke everyone up.**

**“What happened?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**“I just had a nightmare,” Nie Huaisang stammered, “We were...”**

**Wei Wuxian sighed in annoyance, but before he could say anything they heard stone moving. They moved to stand before the statue as it clenched a fist. The smile widened. Nie Huaisang pointed at it and made incomprehensible noises as it started to move more, “How can she suddenly come to life?”**

**Wei Wuxian comfortingly grabbed his arm, “This is the fairy’s soul snatch.”**

They all admired his cool, confident demeanor in the face of such a foe. Though what had he to be afraid of? The cultivators who gathered depended on their swords. Their swords would not pierce stone, especially not stone given strength through stolen souls and years of worship.

But Wei Wuxian was already a master of talismans. Such a foe was exactly what he was better against.

“How fortunate you had a nightmare, Huaisang,” Jin Guangyao commented.

A few murmured agreements. Far better to be woken up by a companion's nightmare than a giant stone fairy's attack.

**It started moving towards them, and they scattered. Lan Wangji tried to attack and was repelled. So was Wei Wuxian. It moved to attack Lan Wangji, but Wei Wuxian blocked it with a talisman. It kept attacking Lan Wangji, but Wei Wuxian used another spell to retrain it. It quickly threw him aside to continue its assault.**

**"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian shouted as the other blocked a blow with his crossed sword and sheath. The strings appeared again as Wei Wuxian pulled back on its arm, bracing himself on its body. He smiled, "Lan Zhan. She has probably developed a crush on you."**

**"Shut up," Lan Wangji snapped.**

**The cords snapped when he forced the statue back. It faced Wei Wuxian, who forced it back with more talismans.**

"Why is it targeting Hanguang-Jun?" Jiang Cheng frowned.

"It sensed the Yin Iron," Said man answered.

He narrowed his eyes at him. What did the Yin Iron have to do with the statue?

Though if he could see the connection, Wei Wuxian definitely had at the time. There would be an explanation soon. It wasn't like his idiotic brother hadn't found ways of disappearing on his own even after he joined up with him.

"He just set Suibian down," One of his own disciples muttered behind him.

He fought not to role his eyes. He depended on talismans long before he set aside his sword. Maybe now everyone could see that and it wouldn't be taken as much as an insult when he stopped using Suibian completely later.

**Nie Huaisang darted forward, "Is she sealed?" He stumbled behind Wei Wuxian as it kept moving, "What now?"**

**"What now?" Wei Wuxian echoed, "Run!"**

**Nie Huaisang ran back a few steps, but stopped when the other two continued their efforts to seal the statue. After getting hit by a few more talismans, she stopped moving.**

**"Be alert," Lan Wangji commanded.**

**"Thank god," Nie Huaisang fiddled with his fan, "Thanks to your presence, Lan-er-gongzi."**

Why didn't he run?

It was puzzling. Nie Huaisang shouldn't have even been there in the first place. He didn't like to fight. He didn't seek out danger. He placed his own comfort above all else. He shouldn't have slept in a dangerous cave. He shouldn't have lingered when they were attacked.

The best thing he could do was run and get help.

But he didn't run. He stayed.

**They weren't given a long reprieve. When they checked the door, they saw the occupants of the village shuffling towards them. Nie Huaisang looked terrified, "What happened out there?"**

**"Many puppets are coming for us," Wei Wuxian reported.**

**Nie Huaisang peeked, his fear growing, "What are they? Shouldn't their souls have been snatched? Why are they increasing in number?"**

**"There is no spirit snatch at all," Wei Wuxian answered, "It was a lie!"**

**Nie Huaisang started to pray, but was stopped by a light hit from Wei Wuxian. The villagers started beating on the doors. They separated to push back against them.**

**"Wen Ruohan would do this to his own people."**

It needed to be said.

For this was the ancestral temple of the DafanWen. This was where Wen Qing was born. Some of the villagers must be her relatives. Everyone else were the civilians she must have seen all the time. Her people were healers, after all, so they wouldn't maintain as much of a distance from ordinary people.

A whole village. A village under Wen Ruohan's protection. They were being used in such a despicable way.

**"Where do you think tyranny starts?" Jin Guangyao wondered, "How can you dominate others when you don't control your own dominion?"**

Lianfeng-Zun's words were well said.

**"Poor Wen Qing," Jiang Yanli lamented.**

More hearts were sympathetic to the surviving Wen. Her loyalty to Wen Ruohan got her people controlled and abused. What would happen if she were disloyal?

The same as what happened to countless Sects, but where the survivors of such carnage for safety with other Sects, who would have taken in Wen dogs? Where could they have run if they chose to flee? With nowhere to go, their only choice was to stay and pray Wen Ruohan was given no reason to harm them further.

**"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian shared a significant look with him.**

**He nodded, and they all gave up on fortifying the doors. Wei Wuxian sealed them shut, but they only seemed to grow stronger. They heard a bird screech, Lan Wangji identifying it as the Dire Owl.**

**“The damn bird again,” Wei Wuxian swore.**

**“Did we fall into a trap?” Nie Huaisang asked.**

**The hoard burst through the doors. Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian spun back, leaving Nie Huaisang to face them alone, “Help!” He shouted, “Wei-xiong!” He dodged the first attack, “Lan-xiong!” He dodged a second and caught the third, using the tool to block another, “Why am I always the unlucky one?” He forced them back.**

**Lan Wangji darted forward to freeze them before they could attack again.**

Nie Huaisang ducked his head at the murmurs of approval from his disciples. They understood he only cowered back to avoid getting in the way of any attack by Hanguang-Jun and Wei Wuxian. Better to be on the floor than hit by friendly fire.

He wasn’t completely useless. If he had to, he could hold his own in a fight. Maybe not against any really powerful cultivators, but certainly against beasts and civilians.

“That wasn’t bad,” His older brother begrudgingly said.

He prayed he wasn’t dragged on more night hunts because of this.

It was alright with Wei-xiong, who didn’t have any expectations of him. He wasn’t sure he could do as well with others.

**“Stay back,” Wei Wuxian pulled the smallest back, then set up a spirit net.**

**Wei Wuxian started to draw his sword, but Lan Wangji stopped him, “Don’t. They’re not dead yet.” Wei Wuxian looked confused, “You forgot. You’re the one who said it. Look at their pupils.”**

**Wei Wuxian did and sheathed his sword, “Lan Zhan, do you have any better ideas?”**

**“Run,” Lan Wangji offered.**

**“Wait, Lan-xiong. Wei-xiong.” Nie Huaisang stuck his hands out, “Isn’t it reckless for us to run through them? Shouldn’t we talk about it? If we go out like this, aren’t we courting death?” He grew more hysterical, “Wei-xiong, I really don’t want to die. My birds...” He was Silenced, but continued to whimper his protests.**

**“Listen, Nie-xiong,” Wei Wuxian grabbed his hand, “Once we get out, you must hold on to me. Don’t let go of my hand, okay?” Nie Huaisang shook his head, “Never let it go, understand?”**

**They made as though to run forward, when the hoard suddenly stilled. The soft sound of an instrument led them away.**

**The perspective switched to reveal Wen Qing playing by her own campfire. She concentrated on drawing them closer, then she stopped and used the fire to immobilize them. Her eyes grew watery.**

**Sorrow turned to fear when she heard the Dire Owl.**

“So she saved all of you,” Jin Guangshan commented, “Yet only Jiang-zongzhu stands up for her.”

Nie Huaisang fluttered his fan, “If I tried to explain what happened...Da-ge would have just said we were even since it was her Sect who put us in danger in the first place.”

That was acceptable. There was no trying to convince Nie Mingjue of the innocence of any Wen. It was a fact he used to his advantage.

He turned his gaze to Hanguang-Jun. Where the Nie Sect was known for their temperaments and occasionally putting rage over reason, the Lan Sect claimed righteousness in all their acts. The Jin Sect Leader had already decided Jin Zixun would go down for his mismanagement, but the Jin Sect’s reputation didn’t have to be the only one to take a hit.

The Second Jade stared back, “I did not know Wen-guniang’s location. It was dangerous to spread word of her true loyalties.”

“And after the war?” His bastard followed up.

“The Lan, Jin, and Nie Sect agreed to question anyone involved with the Yin Iron,” Hanguang-Jun didn’t waver, “I believed if she was arrested, Jin Guangyao would find her innocent.”

How could he know they took the lead on the investigation to ensure the Wen Sect never rose again? He trusted his older brother, who in turn trusted his bastard. In their quest for the Yin Iron, they would have wanted someone as close to Wen Ruohan as Wen Qing. There was no need to go against his Sect Leader if he was reasonably assured she wouldn’t die.

It wasn’t quite honorable, but it was filial, which was just as important.

**It went back to the three in the Temple. Wei Wuxian kept his grip on Nie Huaisang, “Let’s go.”**

**“Don’t move!” Someone commanded. They almost ignored it, but it repeated, “Don’t move!”**

**They turned back to the fairy statue, “She...” Nie Huaisang stammered, “Why would she appear again?”**

**“You fools rushed into the Tiannu Temple,” The person continued, “What punishment do you think you deserved?”**

**“Don’t punish us!” Nie Huaisang begged.**



**“Wei Wuxian,” He sounded more familiar, “You departed without permission. Do you plead guilty?”**

**Wei Wuxian sheathed his sword and rolled his eyes, “Jiang Cheng, if you don’t come out immediately, Lan Zhan will lose his temper.”**

**Jiang Cheng stepped out from behind some stone.**

Some laughed now that the danger had passed.

They really were too young to have gone to war. The three young masters couldn’t bring themselves to cut down puppets so they chose the riskier option of fleeing. They’d barely escaped death, and the fourth young master decided to pull a prank, completely forgetting about the young lady now in danger.

Jin Zixuan burned. He missed the opportunity for this camaraderie.

And it was forever gone. None of them were children any longer. There was no room in their lives for pranks.

**Wei Wuxian ran up to wrap an arm around him, “Why are you here, Jiang Cheng?”**

**“You can come,” Jiang Cheng shoved him off, “Why can’t I?” Wei Wuxian grinned, “It’s fun to travel all the way, isn’t it?”**

**“Without you harping on me, I am much more at ease,” Wei Wuxian teased.**

**“You have the nerve to say that?” Jiang Cheng raised a hand to hit him. Nie Huaisang let himself be dragged between them as a human shield, “You just left a note and disappeared. Do you know how worried I...” He cut himself off, “How worried A-Jie was?”**

**“Jiang-xiong,” Nie Huaisang protested, “If you want to frighten Wei-xiong, that’s okay. Why did you have to involve me and Lan-xiong? We were...eh?” He rubbed his throat, “The Silence spell has been lifted?” They both smiled at Lan Wangji.**

Nie Mingjue’s eye twitched.

Once again, Wei Wuxian used his little brother as a shield from Jiang Wanyin’s ill temper.

Huaisang even scolded him before realizing he wasn’t under a spell anymore. He got through multiple sentences before noticing. Was it that instinctive for him to stand up to his friend? Was the only reason he hadn’t heard any defense of the demonic cultivator sooner because Huaisang didn’t want to upset him?

This went above mere friendship.

He swore internally. He might have to throw the Nie Sect’s name in the competition for who would get Wei Wuxian if these memories suggested he could be rehabilitated.

**“I’m upset about my journey here because of you,” Jiang Cheng glared.**

**Wei Wuxian released Nie Huaisang, “Alright, Jiang Cheng.” He still leaned on him, “It was me who wanted to follow Lan Zhan. You can’t blame him.”**

**“I haven’t blamed you yet,” Jiang Cheng complained, “You’re speaking for him. I don’t know what you’re going to do, but you have seen how dangerous it is. If it weren’t for Wen-guiniang, this time-”**

**“Wen-guniang?” Wei Wuxian interrupted, “Wen Qing has come here too?”**

**“Damn it,” Jiang Cheng swore, “How long has the whistle stopped? I hope Wen-guniang is not in danger.”**

**“Where is she now? Why did you come together?” Wei Wuxian demanded, but Jiang Cheng was already running.**

Many were surprised to find themselves concerned for Wen Qing’s fate.

She defied her Sect to help them, but this was a minor cruelty compared to the full damage the Wen Sect did. They still didn’t know where she was when Cloud Recesses were attacked, nor if her actions impacted the Jiang Sect.

Still, a few found themselves willing to forgive her even if she didn’t turn against Wen Ruohan. The strong could preach about righteousness, but they would never understand how hard it was to be righteous when one’s position wasn’t secure. It was easy to do the right thing when it cost them nothing. It was much harder when it would cost them everything.

## Chapter End Notes

My goal was to get to Yueyang by the end of this chapter, and severely underestimated how much happens in between. Next update should be sooner!

Am I reading too much into NHS's actions? Possibly, but I like to think NHS was aware of how WWX was treated by Madame Yu and tried to intervene subtly. At least, that's how I interpret his words and actions. More will be fleshed out the further we get into the story, but mind the tags!

Comments and kudos are appreciated!

# The Quest Continues

## Chapter Summary

And a character's tragic backstory is revealed.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

**Wen Qing was trying to kill the Dire Owl when Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang found her.**

There were multiple, audible sighs of relief at the sight of her.

They made it through the night. Demonic entities, no matter how powerful, always were easier to deal with in the light of day as long as they could be drawn out. They weren't sure if this held the same with the Yin Iron, but everything felt better in the light.

Besides, they knew everyone here survived. They survived this quest and the war that came afterwards.

**Nie Huaisang stared at the bird, "It's the Dire Owl again. Is Wen Chao nearby? Why on earth does he want to kill us?"**

**"Wen-guniang, are you okay?" Jiang Cheng inquired.**

**"Jiang-gongzi, didn't I tell you to save them and leave?" She asked back.**

**"Wen-guniang, why are you here?" Wei Wuxian asked.**

**She averted her gaze, but was saved from answering by the villagers moving again. Lan Wangji slowed them down, "You should leave," Wen Qing recommended.**

**"Let's go together," Wei Wuxian offered.**

**She shook her head, "I can't." She turned to the other boys, "Jiang-gongzi, you promised me you would listen to me and come here. Take them away quickly."**

**"You can't save them, Wen-guniang," Jiang Cheng disagreed, "You should go before it's too late."**

Jiang Yanli watched sadly. She herself was so different from A-Xuan. Her husband was awkward and aloof, she was humble and warm. They complimented each other well and they loved each other, which was what mattered most. It was the same with A-Xian and Hanguang-Jun. Their hearts were the same, but their personalities couldn't be more different.

A-Cheng and Wen Qing were more similar in personality. They did their best to hide their true emotions, disguising worry as annoyance, fear as anger.

Because they were so similar, they could understand each other better. She wouldn't be scared away by A-Cheng's ill-temper, nor him by her coldness. There wouldn't be misunderstandings between them as there had been between their parents, or her own husband, or whatever Hanguang-Jun and A-Xian referred to their relationship.

It made her heart ache. A-Cheng and Wen Qing both put family before everything else.

Short of tying her up and dragging her away, she wouldn't leave them like this.

**She averted her gaze. Lan Wangji noticed, "You know how to save them?"**

**"Doesn't the dancing fairy extract people's spiritual cognition?" Nie Huaisang asked, "Can they be saved?"**

**Wei Wuxian stepped forward to grab her arm, "Wen Qing. I don't care why you're here but we're all stuck here right now. If we want to get out, we have to work together. If you know how to get them back to normal, I hope you can tell me now."**

**She stared at him, then nodded, "Okay. I'll tell you. Right now, they are not manipulated very well. Wen Chao only borrowed the power of the Yin Iron sealed in the Dire Owl by Wen Ruohan to control them. If you really want to help them, kill the Dire Owl first."**

**He smiled, "You should have told us earlier." He then awkwardly let go of her wrist.**

"She didn't want to endanger Jiang Wanyin," Jin Zixuan noted.

"Or she didn't want to owe him," His half-brother pointed out, "She already owes Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun for saving Wen Ning."

Nie Huaisang hummed in agreement, "Better to add to an existing debt than create new ones."

He made eye contact with the young man many considered a coward, and nodded his thanks. He didn't want anyone whispering that she didn't tell Jiang Wanyin because she didn't think he was strong enough to take down the Dire Owl. He realised how well Nie Huaisang and his half-brother controlled those rumors with their words.

Jin Zixuan wasn't sure if he was helping or hurting, but at this point, it was better to offer his friendship late than never.

**"Wei Ying, set up a Golden Silk Barrier to protect them," Lan Wangji said.**

**He agreed, setting up the barrier around the three of them. Jiang Cheng reacted too late, "What are you doing, Wei Wuxian?"**

**"Wei-xiong, this won't last long," Nie Huaisang complained, "Do you want us dead?"**

**“Jiang Cheng, you can protect them well,” Wei Wuxian replied, “Take care of them.”**

**“You-”**

**“If it doesn’t last long, add a layer of protection. You’re good at this.” Lan Wangji walked away, and his gaze darted after him, “You must protect them well. I wanted to kill that owl long ago. Wait until we get back. Wait for us.” Then he ran after the other.**

**“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng shouted after him, then muttered, “You bastard.” He shared a commiserating look with Wen Qing.**

Nie Mingjue couldn’t help but watch his little brother. He heard him wonder why Wen Chao would be after them, as though Wen Chao’s father hadn’t killed theirs. He ran as fast as Jiang Wanyin to check on Wen Qing. He worried about the Wen dogs that made up the villagers, even after his own life was threatened.

His little brother was right. If he’d told him about this incident, he would have dismissed Wen Qing’s actions. Wen Chao put them in danger, Wen Qing saved them. Without knowing what he did now about Wen Qing, he would have considered the matter settled.

The Nie Sect Leader thought of his earlier decision. If she acted against her own Sect, then he would show her leniency. He could hardly believe how his view of her changed so much in a few hours. She went from the favored niece who did nothing while her tyrannical relatives dominated the other Sects to the abused young woman struggling to keep her people safe.

“Don’t look so worried, Da-ge,” Huaisang glanced at him, “The net lasted.”

That wasn’t what he was worried about.

**Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji chased after the Dire Owl. They stopped in a clearing, watching it circle intimidatingly. A fog descended on them, clouding their sight. They could still hear the Dire Owl. Wei Wuxian checked, “Lan Zhan! Where are you, Lan Zhan?” Lan Wangji said nothing, “Lan Zhan! Where are you, Lan Zhan? Lan Zhan!”**

**“Hallucinations?”**

They weren’t standing that far apart, so it must be hallucinations.

Was this another power of the Yin Iron? They heard of the Yiling Patriarch’s devastation of the Wen before his official return. The Lan and Jiang Sect cultivators didn’t know to keep it a secret when they found all the bodies killed in different ways. Many were forms of suicide. It would make sense if he could give hallucinations leading to that depth of despair.

Those thoughts were put aside by the intrigue of watching Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun fight against another opponent together. This time without Wen Qing or Jiang Wanyin there to interfere.

**They ran into each other, “Lan Zhan. What’s going on?”**

**“Listen,” Lan Wangji ordered. All they could hear was the Dire Owl.**

**“What kind of bird is that?” Wei Wuxian muttered, “It’s more astute than I am.” The fog seemed to thicken, and he shouted again, “Lan Zhan! Where are you, Lan Zhan? Not good. Was Lan Zhan caught by the Dire Owl?”**

**Lan Wangji sent spiritual energy into his sword, lighting it up, “I’m next to you.”**

**“You should have said something,” Wei Wuxian complained.**

**“The mist brought hallucinations made by the Dire Owl,” Lan Wangji theorized.**

**“Don’t worry,” Wei Wuxian assured him, “I can break it with a Glitter Talisman.” But when he tried to concentrate his spiritual energy, he couldn’t summon one.**

Even more challenging.

They’d already seen how much Wei Wuxian used talismans. He used them more than his sword. Something that could interfere with his concentration...would that still be useful against the Yiling Patriarch? Did the talismans he used with resentful energy work in the same manner as spiritual talismans? Was there actually a difference?

He was still incredibly skilled without his talismans, but the point stood.

**“The hallucination can not only disorient people, but it can also disturb the mind,” Lan Wangji decided, “We can’t concentrate at all now.”**

**“That’s strange,” Wei Wuxian turned to him, “Why haven’t you been disturbed?”**

**“The Dire Owl’s hallucination is more disturbing when you have a lot of thoughts in mind,” Lan Wangji said.**

Focus.

Hanguang-Jun was calm, collected. Wei Wuxian was scatter-minded, his brilliant mind jumping from subject to subject, leaving him vulnerable to his thoughts becoming tangled. They rarely saw him give anything his complete concentration.

In the fight against the fairy statue, he spared time for teasing. In the aftermath with the puppets, he spared time to calm Nie Huaisang down.

There was no room for distraction here.

**“Ah,” Wei Wuxian crossed his arms, “Obviously, it is making use of my wisdom.”**

**They fell silent until Lan Wangji sent out a wave of spiritual energy, blocking one chain attack. He jumped to avoid another, landing and moving to stand back to back with Wei Wuxian, who asked, “Lan Zhan, are you alright?”**

**“I’m fine,” He replied.**

**“Did you see who was controlling the bird?”**

**“No.” They stared into the mist, “Wei Ying. Focus on your five senses.”**

**They both closed their eyes. They could hear the cries of the Dire Owl, then Lan Wangji ordered, “Fire-splitting Talisman.” They rotated in time to the sound of the chain, Wei Wuxian barely peeking as he threw the talisman forward. They moved in sync as they blocked and avoided the attacks.**

It was incredible to watch. Even with their eyes closed, they had such an awareness of each other they could move in unison. Their senses were so well-tuned they could sense attacks coming through the hallucinations, yet somehow, they evenly divided the attacks between them, never aiming for the same chain set.

“There might be something to that soulmate business,” Someone muttered.

Jiang Cheng glared in their general direction. He could fight like that with Wei Wuxian, but he’d been raised and trained with Wei Wuxian. Over a decade of being together gave them the knowledge to be in sync in a fight. Maybe not while blind. Maybe not now that he had Zidian and Wei Wuxian had Chenqing.

But they were brothers. They had each others’ backs.

Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun, at that point, knew each other for months. Most of that time was spent in a classroom or the library. If they fought, it was against the other. Even against the Waterborne Abyss, there wasn’t that much actual fighting. They didn’t train for this, yet being together just seemed so natural.

Destined.

He was growing to hate that word.

**“Wei Wuxian, you wretch,” Jiang Cheng watched as they were surrounded, “Come back quickly!”**

**“Fortunately my fan is made of darksteel or else...” Nie Huaisang pushed away the villagers, “Get away from me! Jiang-xiong, please help me mend this. They’re getting us.”**

**“Do it yourself!” Jiang Cheng snapped.**

**“But how?” Nie Huaisang muttered.**

**Wen Qing froze a few with a gesture. Nie Huaisang gestured her closer, “Wen-guniang, come here. Help me here quickly.”**

**She turned to see the elderly woman from earlier. She drew closer, and Nie Huasiang placed an arm to try and stop her, “Wen-guniang. Don’t get too close. Be careful, they may scratch you.” He failed to stop her approach. Jiang Cheng drew closer.**

**“Popo,” She stared sadly at the old woman.**

“These are the people Wei Ying saved from Qiongqi Pass,” Wangji whispered.

Lan Xichen turned sharply to look at him. These weren’t cultivators. These were civilians, normal villagers. There was no reason for any of them to have been placed in a Jin labor camp. It would be a great violation of their agreement if they had, and A-Yao...A-Yao wouldn’t do something like this.

He knew better than to punish someone because of who their parents were.

He believed in his sworn brother, but he also knew Wangji wouldn’t lie to him. He must have been mistaken, or misled by Wei Wuxian. It was why he never asked him about his visit to Yiling. But now, when he had definitive proof of this claim...

Uncle took a deep breath, “That is a bold accusation.”

“Not an accusation,” His younger brother kept staring forward, “An observation.”

Lan Xichen memorized their faces anyways. Just in case.

He prayed this was all some misunderstanding.

**It cut back to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji fighting off the attack. Wei Wuxian was forced to open his eyes, “Lan Zhan, it worked.”**

**“Quiet.”**

**They both refocused.**

**A chain caught Wei Wuxian around the throat and dragged him away. He lost his sword as he was pinned to a tree. He glanced around, then slumped. He smirked as he heard the Dire Owl approaching. He caught it by the neck and began strangling it. Lan Wangji came forward to destroy the chain choking him.**

“An unusual solution,” Jin Guangshan observed.

Jiang Wanyin scowled, “Not for him.”

“Oh?” The Jin Sect Leader prompted.

Nie Huaisang smiled, “Wei-xiong’s endurance is unparalleled. If he has to act as bait to draw an enemy out, he’s confident in his ability to survive the attack.”

So self-sacrifice was natural to him. Such a loyal guard dog the Jiang Sect had. Too bad Jiang Wanyin was so inexperienced to not keep such a commodity close. It was something to be cautious of. Wei Wuxian would do anything to save those he deemed worthy of his protection, but if he found out they were being threatened because of him...

Well, there wasn’t much use in a weapon that self-imploded.



Madam Jin noted the use of the word endurance, and the way A-Li flinched hearing it. There weren't many ways to build up pain tolerance to the point where one could be strangled by chains and remain conscious. There were the methods of the Lan Sect, meditation with a focus on the spirit that allowed it to separate from the flesh when in extreme amounts of pain.

Then there was the old-fashioned way. Wei Wuxian tolerated a great amount of pain by enduring a great amount of pain in the past.

**Wei Wuxian rose, "Did you think you could outsmart me?" He threw it to the ground, "That was close. Lan Zhan, luckily you came just in time. Did you see who it was?"**

**"They just sent a part of their cognition. They didn't come in person," Lan Wangji answered.**

**"Good for him," Wei Wuxian kicked the bird.**

**"The villagers' spiritual cognition has been returned. Let's go," Lan Wangji led the way back. When they reached the clearing, they saw the villagers sitting around, confused. Wei Wuxian scanned the crowd for his friends, but didn't see Jiang Cheng, Wen Qing, or Nie Huaisang. He started running.**

**"Hello, sir. Where are the three people here earlier?" He asked one on his feet.**

**"What?" He asked, "Where am I?"**

**"Why aren't you there?" Jin Guanyao asked.**

**"You'll see," The Jiang Sect Leader's expression darkened.**

So there would be further proof of Wen Qing's innocence. He was learning to read the young man better. He got bitterly jealous whenever Wei Wuxian did something heroic, and he was guiltily upset whenever Wen Qing did something to help him.

They spoke of debt earlier. Life debts.

But he couldn't bring himself to mention the true reason Wen Qing betrayed her Sect. It was the same as the reason he went undercover as a spy.

Wei Wuxian was kind to them. Just as Er-ge was kind to him when he didn't have to be, when, by all social conventions, he shouldn't have been kind to him. It was easy to ignore or disrespect those of a lower station or from an enemy Sect. It took a special person to treat everyone how they deserved to be treated rather than how others said to do.

**They took off in another direction, and the perspective went back to a smaller group of Wens kneeling before a tomb. The elderly woman was crying, "I let Wen-zongzhu down. I almost hurt Wen-guniang. I'm not good at anything." She prostrated herself.**

**"Popo. Get up, please," Wen Qing requested, "Get up, Popo. Come on." She helped her rise.**

**“Wen-guniang. I’m sorry,” The elderly woman apologized, “I’m of no use.”**

**“Popo,” Wen Qing looked around to the rest, “Get up, everybody.” They rose, “Popo. Please don’t say that. I should say sorry to you. All of you, get out of here now. You can go anywhere, except Qishan, and don’t come back here again.” She got nods of agreement from the others.**

Lan Wangji felt his brother glance at him, but didn’t withdraw his earlier accusation.

They fled. They had no part in the war.

That didn’t mean they weren’t hunted down later. They weren’t free just because they weren’t involved. This world wasn’t that simple.

He too struggled to grasp the gray in a world he always viewed as black and white. If he’d never met Wei Ying, perhaps he would still be as rigid as Uncle, fashioned from jade as the rules were carved in stone. Perhaps he would be able to trust the Jin Sect as his brother did and overlook all the obvious signs of their abuse of power.

All he could do was push his brother towards suspicion of Jin Guanyao.

He doubted anything would truly prepare him for the betrayal. Just as he never harbored doubts about Wei Ying, so would his brother until uncontroversial evidence was placed before him of his sworn brother’s crimes.

**Nie Huaisang whispered, “Jiang-xiong. Why do they know Wen-guniang? And why did she bring us to the graveyard?”**

**“How should I know?” Jiang Cheng snapped.**

**“Jiang Cheng!” Wei Wuxian called, “Wen-guniang!”**

**“Wei-xiong!” Nie Huaisang called back, “We are here.” The two of them approached, and he beamed, “Wei-xiong, I knew you could kill the Dire Owl. You really are as sharp as a razor.”**

**“Aiyah,” Wei Wuxian went up onto the platform with them, “But why are you here?” Jiang Cheng glanced at Wen Qing, and he followed his gaze, “Wen-guniang, what on earth is this place?”**

**“This is where my clan was buried,” Wen Qing answered.**

It was a confirmation of what they already knew, but it was still sad.

The graves weren’t well tended to. It was the sign of a dying family. They could no longer spare people to keep the nearby foliage from covering the stone. Or perhaps it was because their leader was so often in Qishan, serving their cruel master.

**“You just followed her?” MianMian inquired.**

Nie Huaisang shrugged, "I followed Jiang-xiong, and he followed her."

"Then, at indoctrination..." She trailed off.

Her friend looked down, "I assume she tried to help us."

More likely she would only try to help Sect Leader Jiang and Wei Wuxian, but helping Wei Wuxian was helping the rest of them. If it weren't for him, they would have been exhausted trying to find the cave, and then killed in that cave. Any debt he incurred to her was a debt they all owed.

If the Sects didn't come to the right decision after this, she would offer her services to the Burial Mound.

**"So that ancestral temple..." He trailed off.**

**"You're right," She stepped closer, "That was the Wen Clan's ancestral temple. We are a collateral branch of the Qishan Wen, specializing in medicine. After leaving Qishan, we lived here for generations. But suddenly, an unexpected disaster happened here."**

**Her thoughts turned to an old memory. She, as a child, was huddled with some of her family members as they ran away from the fairy statue. She was dragged to the side as a young man defended a young boy. The man was thrown aside, and two more men tried to grab the boy, "A-Die!" She screamed, even as the three's spiritual cognition was taken.**

**"A-Qing, go!" Her father shouted as he threw himself at the statue. She ran forward to grab the young boy, picking him up and carrying him away.**

"The statue killed her father," Nie Huaisang commented.

He never imagined having that in common with any of his peers besides Wei Wuxian.

Sure, their family situations weren't ideal. Er-ge and Lan Wangji never talked about their parents, but he'd heard their father was in seclusion before he died mysteriously. He never considered them orphans, since they always had their uncle and continued to have him.

Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng's parents didn't get along. They fought even when he was around, and treated all the children in their care unfairly. Jiang Yanli basically raised Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng on her own, but she was younger than Da-ge was when he became responsible for him. She loved them, but it wasn't enough to undo the damage from Madame Yu and Jiang Fengmian.

They were orphans now, but the war made so many people orphans.

Jin Zixuan's parents hated each other too, but he still had both of them, and they both loved him.

It wasn't the same for the others. Not like it was for himself and Wei Wuxian...and apparently Wen Qing and Wen Ning.

**“As for members of our branch,” She continued, “We are the last few.”**

**“Was it because the dancing fairy extracts spiritual cognition?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**“Yes,” She answered, “Since then, A-Ning and I were brought up by His Excellency back in Qishan.”**

**“But why did the dancing fairy suddenly start hurting people?” Wei Wuxian wondered.**

**She shook her head, “I don’t know.”**

**Wei Wuxian turned around to look at Lan Wangji, who nodded in agreement to whatever he was silently communicating.**

**“I never noticed how much you two stare at each other,” Nie Huaisang commented, fanning himself faster, “It’s like you two communicate telepathically.”**

**“Duel empathy is dangerous,” Lan Qiren narrowed his eyes.**

As much as he hated the constant reminder of who his nephew was in love with, he couldn’t say it would be better if Wangji ended up alone on this mission. Wei Wuxian being there helped him with the fairy statue. Wen Qing was unlikely to have paid attention to Wangji’s struggle if Wei Wuxian weren’t struggling along with him.

Wangji would also be incapable of this sort of interrogation by himself. Wei Wuxian, before he started cultivating with resentful energy, was a social person. Words came easy to him, as did putting others at ease.

They made an admittedly good pair back then.

**It skipped to the five of them travelling through the woods again. Nie Huaisang clasped his hands together, “I hope things won’t go wrong anymore.”**

**Wei Wuxian shoved his sword at him, “If you stay with me, I’m sure you will remain unscathed.”**

**“Stop boasting,” Jiang Cheng scolded, “If Wen-guniang didn’t come to Dafan Mountain, would you still be alive? Staying with you is really rotten luck.”**

**“Jiang Cheng.” Wei Wuxian crossed his arms, “Now that you think I bring misfortune, why did you follow me?”**

**“I...” He trailed off with a nervous glance at Wen Qing, “Who said I was following you? In order to cross Dafan Mountain, there’s only one road. I’d like to say you are following me.”**

So cute.

They all knew he would have followed Wei Wuxian regardless, but them being side-tracked by saving the villagers was all Wei Wuxian following Jiang Wanyin.

**He walked forward, and Nie Huaisang hurried to his side, shushing him, “The barred rock chicken.” He gestured Wei Wuxian closer, “Look at that! There!”**

**“How does it know I am hungry?” Wei Wuxian wondered.**

**“Hey, Wei-xiong. We can catch it from the front and the back,” Nie Huaisang suggested, “Let’s go!”**

**“Jiang Cheng.” Wei Wuxian ordered, “Help me block it from there.”**

**“I won’t,” Jiang Cheng refused, but his stomach growled.**

**Wei Wuxian shoved the other, “Quickly! Nie-xiong is getting far!”**

The three’s antics drew laughter from the gathered cultivators.

“More birds?” Jin Guangyao asked.

“We didn’t eat all day!” Nie Huaisang protested.

Still, for being nearly killed three times in the night and morning, the renowned coward was in a surprisingly good mood. He wasn’t worried that Wen Chao was still out there, aiming for the Yin Iron Hanguang-Jun still possessed.

It was expected from the other three, but they all thought Nie Huaisang would rather hurry to the nearest town for safety.

Maybe he wasn’t such a coward.

**As soon as they were gone, Lan Wangji spoke, “Wen-guniang. You don’t know why the dancing fairy went out of control all those years ago?”**

**“Lan-er-gongzi,” She answered after a long pause, “I just said it. I was little at that time, so I couldn’t figure it out.”**

**“Then did Wen-guniang know about the missing part of the dancing fairy’s heart?” Wei Wuxian asked as he hurried back, having ditched the others.**

“That bastard!” Jiang Cheng scowled.

Nie Huaisang set down his fan, “He told me he needed to relieve himself.”

“He got rid of us,” Jiang Cheng banged his hand on the table before him, “So he could help you interrogate Wen Qing.”

Hanguang-Jun met his gaze, “I didn’t ask him to.”

He scoffed, “You’ve never asked him for anything.”

Except to go to Gusu with him, but that was beside the point. From one look, Wei Wuxian knew they needed to ask Wen Qing more questions. He was still trying to keep himself and Nie Huaisang in the dark about the specifics, and took advantage of the first distraction he saw. What got to him was how successful he was at hiding all of this.

“Would she have talked if all of you were present?” Jin Zixuan inquired, attempting to be reasonable.

He just scowled at his brother-in-law. She wouldn’t have.

She trusted Wei Wuxian more than him.

**“After leaving Cloud Recesses, Wen Chao followed us closely. Do you know why?” He huffed at her silence, “Wen-guniang, if you didn’t know anything, why did you suddenly inform us of the danger?”**

**“Wei Wuxian,” She looked at her, “You saved A-Ning and I saved you, so we are even.” He nodded, “As the Wen Sect’s motto says, every kindness should be returned. I don’t know anything else. Don’t bother asking me.”**

**As she turned away, Wei Wuxian spoke, “The part of the missing fairy is the Yin Iron, right?” She froze, “Wen-guniang. We were deliberately led to this place. The old woman led us to Tiannu Temple when we entered the village. The dancing fairy woke up, but she aimed at Lan Zhan. Not us both.”**

**“If her goal was not the Yin Iron, then the only other logical reason is that...” He glanced back at Lan Wangji and smirked, “She must like Lan Zhan.”**

**“Shut up,” His face pinched.**

No one laughed at his distracted comment.

The dancing fairy was connected to the Yin Iron, and Wei Wuxian was explaining exactly what that meant in detail.

All they could do was listen.

**Wen Qing sighed.**

**Wei Wuxian sobered, “Wen-guniang. The shape of Dafan Mountain is like a Buddha with good geomantic omen. The place should be full of spiritual power, but along the way, it’s weird to see the exhaustion of spiritual power. Even if the dancing fairy is a creation of nature who wants to be humanoid, she should absorb the power of others.”**

**“Centuries went by without incident,” He continued, “So why, after twenty years, did she suddenly start snatching human souls? The only plausible reason is the Yin Iron in her heart. The power of the Yin Iron helped her acquire a human shape. Just like the Water Ghosts. But ten years ago, someone took the Yin Iron away from her heart. Since she couldn’t absorb any power, she started snatching human souls. Am I right?”**

**She averted her gaze, and Wei Wuxian took a step closer, “And the man who took away the Yin Iron was Wen Ruohan.”**

**She thought back to another time in her childhood. Her family stood back as Wen Ruohan removed something from the fairy statue.**

“Wen Ruohan killed our fathers,” Nie Mingjue said.

His mind reeled. Wen Ruohan killed her father around the same time he murdered his own. He took the orphans he created into his ‘care’ and raised them to be assets to himself. He wondered when Wen Qing put the events together for herself, how long she had resented the man who raised her.

She didn’t deserve his condemnation. She didn’t deserve to be exiled to the Burial Mounds. Already, she had made plans to distance her people from Wen Ruohan. It wouldn’t surprise him if she helped the Jiang after Lotus Pier was attacked.

He might actually owe her if she helped Huaisang in the Indoctrination camp.

It burned to see his own mistakes. He thought all the Wen cut from the same cloth and he threw them all to the Jin Sect’s tender mercies. He didn’t trust Jin Guangshan or Jin Guangyao to do the right thing, but he let them take the lead. He stepped back because he didn’t care.

He let innocents suffer because he couldn’t see the difference between Wen Chao and Wen Qing. His little brother didn’t even try to make him see because his hatred was so deeply rooted into his being.

**“Wen-guniang,” Lan Wangji spoke, “Wen Ruohan removed the seal and took out the Yin Iron, which led to the death of your family members. Now Wen Ruohan wants to get the other Yin Iron shards. More people will die because of it.”**

**“Wei Wuxian,” She turned around, “Lan-er-gongzi, I can’t help you. It’s no use telling me this.”**

**“Wen-guniang,” Lan Wangji pressed, “The four directions are guarded by the Yin Iron. Now that three of them have appeared, where’s the last one?”**

**“Wen Ruohan sheltered me and my brother and is kind to us,” She responded, “As for others, I don’t know and don’t want to know. I can’t help you.” She looked back to Wei Wuxian, “Goodbye.”**

“Did she lie?” Lan Qiren wondered, somewhat hopefully.

“No,” Jin Guangyao answered, “In Wen Ruohan’s court, it was safer not to know things.”

As the authority on Wen Ruohan’s court, no one questioned him. He poured himself more tea, wondering when the appropriate time would be to switch it out for liquor. He could tell Da-ge was affected by the revelation that Wen Ruohan killed her father just as surely as he

killed the former Nie Sect Leader, and there was nothing he could do to stop Hanguang-Jun's whispering.

He could get through the incident that happened in the Unclean Realm with minor suspicion, but when Wen Qing came back into the picture after the war was over he would have to answer to his sworn brothers.

It filled him with equal parts dread and relief.

Dread because there was a good chance Nie Mingjue would kill him and Er-ge wouldn't stop him this time.

Relief because he would no longer have to lie to Er-ge. His second sworn brother forgave all his actions. He believed that he was a good man beneath every facade he was forced to wear. He cared for him, trusted him, thought he was someone who needed protection rather than someone who could be dangerous.

Er-ge didn't really see him. While the parts of him he did see weren't lies...they weren't the whole truth.

Would he care for him when he saw everything?

**She walked away as Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang returned. The former called after her, "Wait, Wen-guniang!" He chased after her as well.**

**Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji just stared at each other.**

**"Wen-guniang," Jiang Cheng caught up, "Wen-guniang. Leaving alone is too dangerous for you. You showed up at Dafan Mountain. How can you explain this to the Wen Sect this time?"**

**"Thanks for asking," She looked down, "I'll be careful."**

**"Why not stay with us this time?" He offered hesitantly, "Then you can make a plan."**

**"I must go back," She insisted, "My brother is still in Nightless City."**

**"But-"**

**"Jiang-gongzi, please don't persuade me," She interrupted, "I was in Dafan Mountain to save my people, not to save others. Wen Ruohan still needs my medical help. He won't be hard on me." She nodded, and made to leave again.**

**"Wen-guniang!" Jiang Cheng raised his voice.**

**"Let her go," Wei Wuxian interjected, "She has her own plans. Also...I believe we will see her soon."**

Jiang Wanyin didn't give her the comb.



Jin Zixuan wondered if she would have gone with them if he had. She didn't let him try to persuade her. Was it because he could? If he'd pursued her, pestered her, would she have gone to the Unclean Realm? Would she have returned with him to Lotus Pier? Would Wen Ruohan have seen it as a betrayal, or would he have seen it as an alliance?

If Jiang Wanyin openly courted Wen Qing before the war started, would Lotus Pier have burned at all? Or would Wen Ruohan simply have had Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian killed off in a questionable way and been content with his niece as the new Madam Jiang?

But Wei Wuxian stopped him before he could attempt, and possibly succeed.

Before she was anything to Jiang Wanyin, she was Wen Ning's older sister.

He didn't know much about being a sibling, but from what he'd seen of the others, there was little they wouldn't do to ensure their safety.

He glanced again at Jin Guangyao. If it was better late than never in regards to friendships...what about brotherhood?

**They reached Yunmeng without anything else of note happening. Wei Wuxian was offered free wine, which he immediately accepted. He was then forced to run after Lan Wangji with his mouth full. He grabbed the ribbon trailing from his shoulder, but dropped it at his glare, "Where are you going?"**

**"I'm going to look for the cultivation Sect residing here," Lan Wangji replied.**

**Wei Wuxian grabbed his arm this time to stop him from walking away, "Why should you look for them?" He let go at another glare, "I'd say you'd handle things poorly if it weren't for me. Even if you find them, you won't get what you want."**

**"Then how should I ask?" Lan Wangji wondered.**

**Wei Wuxian glanced to the side, then pointed, "You should go to that place."**

**It was a wine house.**

Those from larger Sects exchanged confused looks. It was good form to speak to the residing cultivation Sect or other high ranking official before performing any service. The local Sect or magistrate should be informed about the various going ons of their territory.

Those from smaller Sects understood how well-informed the general public was. Civilians were more aware than they appeared. They knew when people were disappearing, often before cultivators did. They also warned each other about anything dangerous, often seeing if danger could be avoided before they asked anyone to get rid of it.

It showed how smart Wei Wuxian was, and not just book smart.

Street smart.

**"You just want to drink," Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes.**

**“Wrong,” He pointed at his brother, “I, Wei Wuxian, always separate business from pleasure. Think about that. There are a lot of people here, talking all at once. If something weird happened, then they must have seen or heard it.”**

**“You really have the gift of the gab,” Jiang Cheng grumbled, earning a nudge from the other.**

**Nie Huaisang came running back, “Wei-xiong. Jiang-xiong.”**

**“What’s up, Nie-xiong?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**“Meng Yao hasn’t arrived yet,” Nie Huaisang panted, “Let’s find a place to rest.”**

**“Great!” Wei Wuxian grabbed Jiang Cheng with one hand, “Let’s go.” He grabbed Lan Wangji with the other. The four hurried towards the wine house.**

Once again, Wei Wuxian just casually touched Wangji.

Lan Xichen wished there was some sign of his instability. He wished there was anything he could point out that would impact his brother’s belief in his love as his earlier words shook his belief in A-Yao. But none of his decisions were selfish. Nothing about his behavior was power-seeking or ambitious.

Wei Wuxian just wanted to help. He just kept proving his intentions were pure, even if his methods were questionable at times.

He took a deep breath. He wouldn’t resent his brother for this. He couldn’t resent him for being right about his love, nor for being right about A-Yao if he was.

But why would A-Yao share his memories if they showed his guilt? Why would he help organize this event if it would expose him and humiliate him? It made no sense, unless A-Yao felt his actions were justifiable.

His reasons had always been enough before, but this...this would need better than an excuse.

If it were true, which was still up for debate. Maybe Wen Qing was forced to act out of her character and do something truly deserving of exile. Maybe demonic cultivation changed more than they thought.

The more he watched, the more he felt that was wrong.

**They got seated then Wei Wuxian slammed money on the table, “Three bottles of liquor, please.”**

**“Are you crazy?” Jiang Cheng wondered.**

**“What a generous young man!” The waiter beamed, “Our Dichroa Red of Yueyang is really strong. Only a young man can harness its power.” He nodded, “Please wait a moment.”**

**“Only by spending money can we pull something out of him,” Wei Wuxian said in a low voice.**

**“Don’t ask me when you run out of money,” Jiang Cheng scolded with another eye roll.**

**“The liquor is coming,” The waiter announced, running over with a tray, “Gongzi, this is the liquor you ordered.”**

**“Get to the point,” Lan Wangji ordered.**

Many agreed.

While it would undoubtedly be entertaining to watch Wei Wuxian turn up the charm on the waiter, they were eager to get to his encounter with Xue Yang.

It was ironic. Listening to the locals would lead them to the rumors about the Chang Sect’s destruction. If they’d just done as Hanguang-Jun wanted they would have ended up at the Chang Sect’s doors and discovered the massacre.

**Wei Wuxian chuckled, then started to pour his drink, “Waiter, this is our first time in Yueyang. Is there anything interesting about Yueyang?”**

**“What kind of interesting things do you want to know?” The waiter asked eagerly.**

**Wei Wuxian hummed, “What I mean by interesting is, the eerier the better. So is there anything bizarre?”**

**“Bizarre?” The waiter echoed.**

**“Bizarre things like a ghost estate, grave, or mutilation of the body, or something unusual, any soul being snatched and so on.” He drank after finishing.**

**“Gongzi, you really have a strong taste,” The waiter commented.**

**“Waiter, what is located to the southeast of Yueyang?” Lan Wangji asked.**

**“In the southeast is the house of the Chang Sect,” The waiter answered, “Gongzi, as you’ve mentioned, I remember a bizarre incident that happened recently. If you walk along the path outside of the city for a few miles you will see a well-built house. That is the Chang Sect’s house.”**

**“The YueyangChang?” Nie Huaisang repeated, “They are a cultivation Sect that settled here.”**

**“Yes,” The waiter nodded, “They are cultivators. Although there are only a few members in the Chang Clan’s house, there are a dozen of them living in Yueyang.” He glanced around, “But for unknown reasons, they all disappeared recently.”**

Everyone leaned forward.

It was Wei Wuxian, Jiang Wanyin, and Lan Wangji who discovered the slaughtered Chang Sect, but of course the locals would have noticed something strange when cultivators didn't come into the village.

Some wondered how long it would take their villages to notice the absence of the Sect.

It wasn't just Lotus Cove that was attacked. The rest of Lotus Pier was as well. They lived close to the non-cultivators. Anything that happened to them would be reported immediately, which was why the Sunshot Campaign kicked off so quickly.

Unlike the attack on Cloud Recesses, which was already so far away from Gusu that it barely drew attention from the nearby town. It took weeks for news of the attack to reach the rest of the cultivation world. Many heard it from Lan Xichen directly when he went around rousing the minor Sects to the cause.

**"Disappeared?" Wei Wuxian inquired slowly.**

**"It was assumed, but it should not be like that," The waiter added.**

**"What do you mean?" Jiang Cheng demanded.**

**"It is because the people of the Chang Sect don't appear in Yueyang anymore," The waiter continued, "But each night, people can hear sounds from the house of the Chang Sect, like heavy raps on the door."**

**"Like knocking?" Wei Wuxian clarified.**

**"Yes," The waiter nodded, "It continued for ten days with deafening knocks on the door. There were cries and shrieks inside, as if everyone was locked in the house and couldn't get out."**

**"Did anyone go inside to check?" Jiang Cheng asked.**

**"Of course," The waiter insisted, "But there's no one in the daytime. At night, there will be knocking. Don't you think it's horrible?" The young masters exchanged horrified glances, "See? It's almost evening."**

**The piece of Yin Iron activated, and Lan Wangji gripped it tightly against his chest. Wei Wuxian placed a hand on his shoulder, "Lan Zhan," He held him tightly, "Lan Zhan, relax and concentrate. Lan Zhan, concentrate!"**

**"Wangji," Lan Xichen glanced between his present brother and the one in pain.**

**"Can the Yin Iron possess someone?" Nie Mingjue demanded.**

Nie Huaisang had been too worried about Lan Wangji dying in a wine house to really think about what happened. The Yin Iron was dangerous, but it was dangerous because of what it could be used to do. Not because of what it could do to someone. It seemed strange to think an inanimate object capable of possession.

It wasn't just one resentful spirit attached, after all, but the resentment of many.

Would that make possession more likely or less likely?

"Not possession," Lan Wangji answered, "Communication."

"Do you think Wei-xiong's talked to him?" Nie Huaisang wondered.

It probably didn't say anything nice, but was that where the damage resentment did to the temperament came from? If so...

"Is that why he drank so much?" He followed up, the realization that this was why he always had a bottle of liquor on him after his return was too big for him to keep to himself.

Wei Wuxian always drank more than he was really comfortable with. His tolerance, for alcohol as well as pain, was unmatched by anyone else their age. Nie Huaisang knew he wasn't dependent on it, but he still worried that one day he would be. He feared the day where his friend couldn't face the world sober, where all his struggles became too much.

And that was before he knew about the negative voices in his head with resentment powerful enough to break Hanguang-Jun's thick face.

**"It's the Yin Iron," Jiang Cheng observed as Lan Wangji struggled.**

**"What's up?" Nie Huaisang's eyes widened, "Is something going to happen?"**

**"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian insisted.**

**The Yin Iron showed Lan Wangji glimpses of the Chang massacre.**

**"Go..." Lan Wangji said slowly, "To the Chang Sect."**

**Jiang Cheng nodded.**

It made sense that this would be why A-Xian drank so heavily.

Jiang Yanli hoped they could get rid of it, but was this connected to the Yin Iron or just resentful energy in general? Even if they purged him of both, would its visions and words haunt him still? She remembered having to draw him out of his rage a few times, but was that rage not his but someone else's?

This just reminded her that recovery wasn't as simple as just getting her brother out of exile. There was so much she still didn't understand about how he damaged himself.

**"I won't go," Nie Huaisang decided, "I'll wait here for Meng Yao."**

"Now you do the sensible thing," Nie Mingjue muttered.

MianMian sighed, "It's one thing for a village to be possessed. It's quite another to take on something that may have destroyed an entire Sect."

Honestly, Nie Huaisang wasn't as pathetic as everyone made him out to be, but if this quest hadn't made that clear, then nothing else would. There was more to strength than how well one wielded a blade. There was more to courage than challenging evil to a fight.

Nie Huaisang wasn't the ideal Nie Sect cultivator, but he was far from weak or helpless. He just lacked the proper motivation to apply himself to problem solving.

**It was night when they arrived at the Chang Sect's house.**

**"No knocking on the door," Jiang Cheng observed, "Did the waiter fool us with nonsense?"**

**Lan Wangji held up the Yin Iron, showing it was glowing, "Someone has used the Yin Iron here."**

**"Let's go," Wei Wuxian decided.**

**They heard the knocking as soon as they got up the first set of steps.**

**"The knocking," Jiang Cheng muttered.**

**Wei Wuxian traced a talisman, "Open!" He commanded. The door did, revealing two bodies hanging just inside the entrance, "*Blood like a stream. The entire clan was murdered.*"**

**After exchanging looks, they continued inside anyways. Everywhere, there were dead bodies.**

**"Xue Yang did that."**

**"He killed so many."**

**"How can he still be free from justice?!"**

**"He won't be for much longer, once we see his face."**

**"Who could be so brutal?"**

Su She looked at the slaughter. He knew that Jin Guangyao hoped to persuade Xue Yang to their cause once he was caught, but he'd only heard rumors of this. Seeing it with his own eyes made him doubt such a murderer could be controlled. If he ended up being a threat to them, it was far better to just allow the Sects to kill him.

As much as he would like to see certain Sects brought low, massacring them wasn't on his agenda. At least, he wouldn't kill them before he shamed them and brought them down.

Though maybe that's why Jin Guangyao wanted Xue Yang. Someone had to get their hands dirty, and it might as well be the one responsible for a river of blood already. He also had the power to bring down a Sect, which both himself and Jin Guangyao lacked.

**They knelt to start checking them. Wei Wuxian whispered, “The bodies are blue. The colors of their pupils have changed. There are red cracks on their necks. Before they died, they were all made into puppets.”**

**They glanced around, taking in the complete sight of the slaughter. Slowly, they rose to their feet, Wei Wuxian muttering, “Who on earth did this? Who would do this?”**

**Lan Wangji held up the active Yin Iron, and turned to find Xue Yang sitting on a nearby rooftop.**

“That’s what he looks like?!”

“He’s so young.”

It was like watching their reaction to Wei Wuxian’s first appearance all over again.

There was this silly belief that because someone was evil and rotten on the inside, their outward appearance somehow reflected that. Beautiful people were inherently good, while ugly people shouldn’t be trusted.

How foolish. A face was merely a face. A handsome one could hide a host of sins. An ugly one could disguise a heart of gold.

## Chapter End Notes

A wild Xue Yang has appeared! What do y'all think of him? I know a lot of people are invested in him, XXC, and SL, but I'm not one of them.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter! Thank you for your continued support!

# To Dream The Impossible Dream

## Chapter Summary

"To right the unrightable wrong  
And to love pure and chaste from afar  
To try when your arms are too weary  
To reach the unreachable star"

## Chapter Notes

Title from Man of La Mancha

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

**“Welcome,” Xue Yang called down, rising to his feet.**

“Do demonic cultivators have a dress code?” Sect Leader Yao wondered.

Many silently wondered the same thing. Now that they had gotten over how young and handsome the mass murderer was, they couldn’t help but note the similarities in how he and Wei Wuxian dressed. Then the similarities in how they held themselves.

Yet there were subtle differences. Where Wei Wuxian held himself confidently, Xue Yang’s posture dripped with arrogance. Wei Wuxian’s amusement in dangerous situations was an innocent sort, curious at best, mischievous at worst. Xue Yang’s amusement at the sight before him was maniacal, his smile cruel.

Xue Yang was a dangerous man with no redeemable qualities.

**Before he could say more, Xiao Xingchen landed on the roof, “Xue Yang, I won’t let you escape this time.”**

**“Xiao Xingchen,” Xue Yang whined, “You are so persistent. You finally got me after such a long time tracking me.”**

**“Who are you?” Jiang Cheng demanded, “Why do you kill innocent people?”**

**“I almost lost my interest in the past few days,” Xue Yang ignored the questions, “It’s finally getting exciting now.”**

**“Why did he kill the Chang Sect?”**



“Why? On Wen Ruohan’s orders, of course!”

Jin Guangyao weighed the repercussions of speaking, before sighing, “Xue Yang never intended to return to the Wen Sect.”

“What do you mean?” Jin Zixuan frowned, “He couldn’t after he got caught. Wen Ruohan wouldn’t want proof of his wickedness.”

He barely held back a scoff. Wen Ruohan would have taken Xue Yang back no matter what he did or didn’t do. Xue Yang had a piece of the Yin Iron. That alone was worth the ire of all the other Sects combined. Besides, Wen Ruohan could easily have pretended Xue Yang was locked in the dungeons rather than in his throne room, helping with demonic cultivation.

Much like his father intended to do, should Xue Yang get caught again.

“A-Yao?” Er-ge prompted.

He shook his head, “It would be for the best if you heard his reasons from him.”

Jin Guangyao was sure Xue Yang said something to Wei Wuxian. Maybe it wasn’t the same as their talk in the dungeon, but it needed something he could elaborate on without sounding too sympathetic. If he were truly lucky, then someone else would put the pieces together and understand Xue Yang’s actions.

Knowing the people in the room, that wouldn’t happen. None of them had an inkling of an understanding.

**“Xue Yang,” Xiao Xingchen continued, “Since you came out of Qishan, many cultivators have been murdered. I’ve been tracking you for half a month, and you got away every time. Now you killed the members of the Chang Sect.” Wei Wuxian glanced at Lan Wangji, “I will make you pay for your crime today!”**

**Held at sword point, Xue Yang complained, “Friend, I plead guilty.” He crossed his arms smugly, “But as for punishment, it depends on whether you can catch me.”**

**With that, he spread his arms and leaped backwards. Xiao Xingchen made to follow, but didn’t need to as Wei Wuxian sent out a talisman. A familiar cord appeared.**

**“What’s this?” Jiang Cheng inquired.**

**Wei Wuxian smirked and yanked his arm back. Xue Yang came with it, landing on his back in the courtyard.**

Nie Huaisang wondered when that was going to make a reappearance. He cringed, “Let’s not call it marriage then.”

“Perhaps Annoyance then,” MianMian suggested.

He hummed in agreement.

Though it was interesting. The first person he attached it to, the person who inspired it, was Lan Wangji. His soulmate, the first person who ever matched him in skill and intellect. Someone relatively new in his life, who didn't stand by and watch him be punished but knelt to take the same punishment with him.

The second person he attached it to was the man he became. Or, well, it was better to say Xue Yang was the man everyone thought Wei Wuxian became. A user of the Yin Iron. A demonic cultivator. A mass murderer who allied himself with the Wen. Someone whose motives were shrouded in mystery, and thus whose future actions could not be predicted.

Wei Wuxian should have been like Hanguang-Jun. He should be who all cultivators aspired to be.

Instead, he was reviled more than Xue Yang.

**Xue Yang looked at his bound wrist, "Funny."**

**Xiao Xingchen descended, and a fight began. Jiang Cheng moved to help, but Wei Wuxian stopped him, "Eh, let's watch. This cultivator's spiritual power is condensed and better than this lad. Don't get involved now."**

**So the three watched the fight continue. When Xue Yang got too close, Wei Wuxian threw him off balance with a tug of the cord. He grinned, "Lan Zhan, are you still bored?" Getting no response, he hummed and turned his attention back to the fight.**

**Xiao Xingchen managed to cut Xue Yang's face, and Wei Wuxian stopped Xue Yang's next attempt to flee. The villain stopped when Xiao Xingchen pressed his sword to his throat.**

So Wei Wuxian was the reason Xue Yang was captured.

It wasn't that surprising given the journey up until now.

A few muttered about the dishonorable way he went about winning. Talismans were already considered cheap tricks, but using one to interfere in another duel made an even cheaper victory.

Then again, Xue Yang slaughtered multiple Sects using the Yin Iron. It was also safe to assume Xue Yang wouldn't fight with honor, why give him an unnecessary advantage? Also, as capable as Xiao Xingchen was, he already revealed that the criminal eluded him before. It was safer to cut off any retreat before it could be made.

Some resisted such allowances. They were sliding down a slippery slope. If they kept excusing his actions, would they end up excusing demonic cultivation?

He had to cross the line at some point.

**Wei Wuxian held up his wrist, "How do you feel, buddy? Is it fun?"**

**"What is your talisman?" Xue Yang demanded, "It's quite powerful."**

**“I call it Bonding,” Wei Wuxian tilted his head, “Or Binding, but it’s kind of a waste to use it on you. I have to find another name for it.”**

**“How about Dying?” Xue Yang asked as he swirled up a cloud of powder around them.**

**“Qiankun wave,” Lan Wangji warned.**

**“Watch out!” Wei Wuxian called, bringing his arm up to shield his face.**

**Xue Yang made to stab Xiao Xingchen while he was distracted, but Song Lan descended and blocked the blow, holding his sword to the criminal’s throat. He glanced back, “Xingchen.”**

**“Zichen,” Xiao Xingchen replied.**

Wangji sat up straighter. Just slightly, but noticeable enough to him.

Lan Xichen heard the same stories about Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan. It was a childish fantasy to run off and become a famous rogue cultivator. Not being part of a Sect meant no Sect responsibilities or politics. It meant freedom in the truest sense, with no one there to censor his behavior or dictate his actions.

Yet it also meant not having a home. It seemed a lonely life, though nearly every rogue cultivator of note had a cultivation partner they were content with.

He wouldn’t trade Cloud Recesses for that life. As many tales as he was told of the great love a Lan would feel towards their fated one, he couldn’t imagine feeling that way towards anyone. He couldn’t fathom being content with just one person.

He had his brother. He had his sworn brothers. He had his Sect. While the idea of marriage wasn’t an unattractive one, he always saw it as something others would have. Not him.

**Xue Yang laughed as he was bound. Xiao Xingchen sheathed his sword, “Xue Yang, do you confess?”**

**The delinquent rolled his eyes, “Of course.”**

**They moved indoors, binding Xue Yang up more securely. Xiao Xingchen then turned to them, “So you three are all disciples of main clans. No wonder you behave gracefully and are remarkably skilled. I’m Xiao Xingchen. This is my friend, Song Lan.” Song Lan nodded.**

**Lan Wangji elaborated, “Xiao Xingchen, the Moon in the Breeze. Song Zichen, the Gentry despite the Frost. Your decency is known to us.” They all bowed.**

**“You flatter me, Lan-er-gongzi,” Song Lan replied, “I’m not worthy of such compliments.” He sighed, “I happened to hunt nearby today, and rushed here when I noticed Xingchen’s message.”**

**“Your kindness in saving the world is famous,” Jiang Cheng smiled, “It’s an honor to meet you.”**

“What happened to them?”

Everyone was aware that they weren’t involved in the war. Then again, the last confirmed sighting of Xue Yang was his attack on the Snow White Pavilion where Song Lan was trained. Perhaps they were both back on the hunt for Xue Yang.

Though there was a possibility they got caught up in the war anyways and no one knew. While their names were well-renowned, they were learning how inaccurate drawings and other depictions were when it came to people with reputations.

**Xue Yang started laughing again.**

**Wei Wuxian approached him, “What are you laughing at?”**

**“Nothing,” Xue Yang looked away dismissively, “I just feel disgusting seeing the so-called gentries being so hypocritical.”**

**“You!” Jiang Cheng started.**

**Xiao Xingchen held up a hand to stall him, then moved closer, “You have a notorious record at a young age, Xue Yang. And awfully cunning. He caused the recent continuous massacres of these minor sects.” He turned back to face them, “Though he’s not resisting now, he will definitely escape when there is a chance. We must not be distracted by him.”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded and crossed his arms, “Intriguing. I’m curious about how he would escape.”**

Nie Mingjue turned his gaze to Jin Guangyao, who met it without flinching.

How did Xue Yang escape?

The question haunted him. He couldn’t shake the suspicion that his former Vice General had helped the criminal escape, but why would he betray him only to turn around and take a sword to the chest? Did Xue Yang manage to corrupt him? What could the criminal offer him that he couldn’t? What reason could Jin Guangyao have to help him?

Did he kill the Captain to help Xue Yang escape? Did the Captain truly betray him first? No, he was certain Jin Guangyao was lying when he questioned him...

He didn’t understand. But Jin Guangyao didn’t want him to understand. He kept his true ambitions to himself. He only revealed his true face in a mirror.

Xichen believed there was a good man beneath it all, but Xichen was...naive, in many ways. Xichen convinced himself he was better than Wangji when it came to socializing, but the truth was Xichen only had one friend before the war. Now he had two, and he fell for Jin Guangyao as quickly as Wangji fell for Wei Wuxian.

Not in the same way, but it was plain as day that Xichen grew to need Jin Guangyao. He depended on him, confided in him. He let him past the impersonal mask he put up around others. Xichen guarded his heart fiercely, knowing what love had done to his family, but he still loved Jin Guangyao.

Nie Mingjue couldn't see past the blood of his own disciples on Jin Guangyao's hands.

Xichen couldn't see past his affections.

In the end, neither of them knew the man they'd sworn brotherhood with, and he hated that.

**Lan Wangji held up the still active shard of the Yin Iron in his possession, then looked at Xue Yang, "Hand it over."**

**"What?" Xue Yang asked.**

**"The Yin Iron," Lan Wangji clarified.**

**"I have no idea about what you are saying," Xue Yang denied, "I just killed them. Never aimed at money. It doesn't matter if it's iron or gold, I didn't touch it."**

**"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian said, "Don't bother talking to him. Just search him." He held out his sword, "Hold this for me." Lan Wangji looked down at it, but didn't move. Wei Wuxian just moved it to his other hand, "I'll do it on my own."**

**He started patting down Xue Yang, who acted shocked, "A young master from a famous sect is searching another man like this. Aren't you worried about your name if word spreads out?"**

It was inappropriate to touch anyone so, but excusable given the circumstances.

Again with the excuses.

**"At least he didn't strip him," Jin Zixuan muttered.**

Jin Zixun rubbed at his robes hiding the curse marks. The more he watched, the less certain he was that Wei Wuxian was the one behind his curse. Wei Wuxian still didn't know his place, but his irreverence meant he didn't take anything seriously. He wasn't the type to hold grudges as nothing truly seemed to anger him.

That might change later, but his certainty was shaken.

He needed to consider other suspects before it was too late.

**Wei Wuxian drew back to look him in the eye, "Sorry, among hundreds of sects, when it comes to being cheeky, no one can beat me." He laughed slightly after a moment.**

**Xue Yang laughed as well, "How interesting."**

**Wei Wuxian continued his body search, finding nothing. He shook his head at Lan Wangji, “Lan Zhan,” He drew closer, “How about taking out your Yin Iron to see if it can sense something?”**

**“No need,” Lan Wangji replied, “After we got in, there hasn’t been any further reaction.”**

**Wei Wuxian moved further into the room, “He must have hidden it somewhere that’s why he didn’t resist at all.”**

**“Where do you think he would hide the Yin Iron?” Jiang Cheng asked.**

**“I think,” Wei Wuxian crossed his arms, “The most dangerous place is the safest.”**

**The others spread out to check the bodies.**

Leaving Wei Wuxian with Xue Yang.

This was why Hanguang-Jun could not say Wei Wuxian did not steal Xue Yang’s Yin Iron. Neither could Sect Leader Jiang declare him innocent. They left him alone with the criminal, unsupervised, and neither could say with certainty that nothing occurred. For all they knew, Xue Yang told him where he hid the Yin Iron, sensing a sympathetic soul.

Or it could be nothing, and Wei Wuxian managed to acquire his Yin Iron at a later time.

There was also the small possibility of the Stygian Tiger Amulet not being made of Yin Iron at all, but something more powerful...

It wasn’t a possibility many wanted to consider.

**Wei Wuxian stayed close to Xue Yang. He stared at him for a long moment, before beginning, “Xue Yang, tell me, are you under the Wen Sect’s orders?”**

**Xue Yang laughed, “You flatter me. I’m just a hooligan in Kuizhou. I’m a nobody. The Wen sect is far out of my league.”**

**“You can’t reach big sects,” Wei Wuxian walked around him, “But you can be ruthless to minor ones without even frowning.”**

**Xue Yang scoffed, “Yes, I killed several irrelevant people, but I already told you. It’s none of the Wen Sect’s business. It’s a personal thing.”**

**“Purely personal,” Wei Wuxian looked away, “What kind of personal thing could make you this malevolent?”**

**Xue Yang just smirked.**

Jiang Yanli shivered at his smirk.

“He has to be lying...right?” A-Xuan asked.

“Wen Chao was ordered to help Xue Yang in Yueyang,” A-Cheng recalled, “They hadn’t heard from him. They thought something was wrong.”

“But nothing was wrong. He was just playing with the Chang Sect,” Nie Huaisang bit his lip, “Does that mean the massacre of the Chang Sect wasn’t in Wen Ruohan’s plans? Or was he not supposed to use the Yin Iron to reanimate them afterwards?”

“Either way, he had a vendetta,” A-Cheng glanced at her.

“Are you blaming the Chang Sect for their own destruction?” Sect Leader Ouyang demanded.

“Of course not!” A-Cheng scowled, “I only meant this confirms Lianfeng-Zun’s words. Xue Yang here is no longer working for the Wen Sect.”

She glanced at her husband’s half-brother, who oddly had no words for this. She could imagine many reasons that could make someone as malevolent as Xue Yang. If their mother convinced her and A-Cheng that A-Xian was just a servant. If he grew up without any love and only scorn...well, how at fault would he be if he avenged his mistreatment?

If someone insulted her mother-in-law, A-Xuan would be justified in taking their tongue, even their life if he was so incensed. Whereas Jin Guangyao had to plaster on a smile at the same offense. An offense committed nearly every day.

Hurt people hurt people.

She wondered if he was silent because he could imagine a grievance deserving of a massacre.

**Wei Wuxian, seeing he wasn’t going to get an answer and the others were meeting up outside, went to join them. Lan Wangji spoke first, “There is no sign of repressing the Yin Iron.”**

**The gathered cultivators exchanged disappointed and worried glances. Wei Wuxian glanced back at Xue Yang.**

**“Wei-xiong!” Nie Huaisang shouted, “Lan-xiong! Jiang-xiong!”**

**“Nie-xiong,” Wei Wuxian responded as the Young Master of Qinghe hurried in with his entourage.**

**“I came as fast as I could after meeting up with Meng Yao at the inn,” Nie Huaisang spoke as he took in the carnage, “You...what happened? You don’t look well.”**

**Wei Wuxian once again shared a look with Lan Wangji.**

Nie Huaisang threw a nut at him.

Lan Wangji caught it easily, then looked at him oddly.

The smaller man rolled his eyes, “I’m starting to hate when you and Wei-xiong do that.”

Do what? Look at each other?

“It is annoying,” Jiang Wanyin agreed.

It wasn’t his fault they used to communicate so easily. All it took was a look, and Wei Ying seemed to understand more than he could ever convey with his words. That didn’t last forever. No, when he started cultivating with resentful energy, looking at each other no longer worked. There was dissonance where there was once harmony.

And he didn’t have the words to make up for it.

**Meng Yao bowed, “Nie-zongzhu cares about your safety. He sent me to meet you. Nie-zongzhu received a letter from Lan-zongzhu, please come to Qinghe to talk with him.”**

**“My brother’s letter?” Lan Wangji inquired, “Is there something wrong in Cloud Recesses?”**

**“Nothing important,” Meng Yao assured him, “Please come with me, Lan-er-gongzi. Nie-zongzhu is waiting at the Unclean Realm.”**

**Lan Wangji turned to look at Wei Wuxian.**

Nie Huaisang threw another nut across the room. It was a harmless, meaningless distraction really.

Wei Wuxian hadn’t taken advantage of his moment alone with Xue Yang to find out where he hid the Yin Iron. They got through the first grey area.

Besides, he was still uncomfortable with what happened with Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan.

He tried to give his friend as much privacy with his martial uncle as he could, but they had a dangerous criminal to transport, and the Wen Sect pursued them. He didn’t look at them when he rushed them, otherwise he would have cracked and given them more time. Time they didn’t have.

**Wei Wuxian looked back at Xue Yang, “Xiao-xiong. Xue Yang’s hiding of the Yin Iron is a serious matter, do you trust us to take Xue Yang to Nie-zongzhu and ask him to see for himself? By the way, this is Nie-zongzhu’s younger brother.”**

**Nie Huaisang cleared his throat and straightened.**

**“Nie-zongzhu is famous for his heroic spirit and clear standards,” Xiao Xingchen praised, “I believe he will judge it fairly.”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, and they all turned to look at Nie Huaisang, who cleared his throat again nervously, “Of course.”**

Nie Mingjue appreciated Wei Wuxian’s words and deference.



Most people wouldn't say his brother was his brother without stipulations. They would add cowardly or weak. Others wouldn't have bothered pointing out who Huaisang was. Instead, they would have said Meng Yao was his most trusted attendant. They would have said he sent his most trusted disciples to retrieve his best friend's younger brother.

They wouldn't have viewed Huaisang as an extension of himself, who should be trusted the same.

If anyone else had said the same words, Huaisang would have flinched. It would have been an insult, a reminder of how different they were.

Yet Huaisang preened because Wei Wuxian meant it. He didn't shy away from leading because his friend was entrusting him with this. Nie Huaisang was bolder in the presence of his friends.

**"Xue Yang is cunning," Xiao Xingchen warned, "You'd better set off in case of other accidents."**

**"Won't you come with us?" Jiang Cheng asked.**

**"We have to say goodbye to you," Xiao Xingchen declined.**

**"Friends," Meng Yao tried, "Please come along with us to Qinghe since you've made an effort too. We should discuss how to handle Xue Yang and the QishanWen."**

**At the allusion to war, Song Lan glanced back at Xiao Xingchen. The man in white bowed, "I don't know anything about the Yin Iron. Song Lan was just passing by. Moreover, we are not from any sect, so we don't care much about bloodline, but we cherish those with the same ambition."**

**"We don't want to attach ourselves to any sect. Now that Xue Yang has been arrested I believe that you will sentence him fairly. As for the sect's conflict..." He exchanged a long look with Song Lan, "That's none of our business."**

It often felt like the world revolved around Sect politics, but it didn't.

Cultivators were powerful. They lived longer than non-cultivators. Neither meant they were more important than non-cultivators.

If they really thought about it, they needed the civilians far more than the civilians needed them. There weren't many demonic entities that could wipe out entire settlements, and they usually found a way to avoid dangers when they showed up.

Meanwhile, there weren't any Sects that did their own farming. They depended on the villages they attached themselves. They offered protection in exchange, but food was more necessary than safety.

Sadly, not many of the esteemed cultivators gathered saw the world that way.

**“Exactly,” Song Lan agreed, “If you need us for the sake of the world one day, we would not decline then.”**

**Everyone bowed, and Wei Wuxian huffed, “It’s good that you care less about bloodlines, but cherish those who share ambitions. Lan Zhan and I went out on a night hunt together for the same reason.” Both Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng turned to him, “Am I right, Lan Zhan?”**

**“A night hunt together?” Jiang Cheng demanded, “Don’t you dare go back to Lotus Pier!” Wei Wuxian stuck his sword out to hit him, “You!”**

A few laughed.

Even in such a situation, they made time to mess around.

When did they get so serious?

**“Where do you cultivate and how can we find you?” Lan Wangji asked.**

**Song Lan saluted, “I cultivate in the Snow White Pavilion.”**

**“My master is Baoshan Sanren,” Xiao Xingchen answered, then saluted.**

**“*Baoshan Sanren*,” Wei Wuxian repeated in his head, his eyes widening as he turned to his brother.**

Lan Qiren felt another wave of sympathy for the soon-to-be demonic cultivator.

There was so much he didn’t know about his past, about his family. He was so desperate to feel a connection he went on this quest, where his life was endangered multiple times. At least it led him to cross paths with Xiao Xingchen, his martial uncle...

But he still couldn’t share the burden of the Yin Iron fully because Wei Wuxian was a loyal child who didn’t dare spread Lan Sect secrets without permission.

He wondered how this quest would have gone if Wei Wuxian were allowed to speak freely. Surely, as a student of Baoshan Sanren, Xiao Xingchen would have heard of Lan Yi. If Wei Wuxian told him the full story of what happened to Lan Yi, his martial uncle would have felt the same filial duty to see it repressed.

Wangji wouldn’t have returned to Cloud Recesses alone. Maybe, with Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan helping, they could have avoided giving up the Yin Iron at all.

But Wei Wuxian didn’t, because he didn’t know how much he could trust his own family.

**It skipped to the next morning, where Wei Wuxian stood with Xiao Xingchen on the road again, “Wei-gongzi, I’m so sorry,” The latter apologized, “I learned from Baoshan Sanren, but I’m the last one that got accepted. So I only know that Cangse Sanren is the master’s most favored student. But I’ve never met her.”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded absently, continuing to stare out over the hills. Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang watched him with concern. Xiao Xingchen continued, “I didn’t expect you to be my shijie’s son.”**

**“Yes,” Wei Wuxian said, “We are the same age. But seriously, you are my uncle.” Xiao Xingchen smiled, then turned to also admire the view. Wei Wuxian sighed, “I’m wondering when I can visit the Grandmaster.”**

**“She lives freely without a fixed residence,” Xiao Xingchen advised, “Moreover, accomplished students don’t go back. That is our tradition.” Wei Wuxian looked saddened, “But Master will be happy when she meets you.”**

**Wei Wuxian’s expression lit up, and the two nodded to each other.**

Jiang Cheng frowned. If Baoshan Sanren lived without a fixed residence, how was Wei Wuxian able to locate her?

He thought Xiao Xingchen would have told him more. Earlier, Wei Wuxian admitted all he remembered of his mother was her laughter as he rode on the back of a donkey. He didn’t remember the stories of her Master.

He brought a hand up to his chest, feeling his golden core thrum strongly within him. It didn’t feel real sometimes, that he was given a second chance where so many strong cultivators were burnt out forever. Yet here he sat, his spiritual energy stronger than ever, all because he was lucky enough to have an adopted brother connected to an immortal.

He thought Xiao Xingchen must have mentioned the location, but he was wrong.

Song Lan must have told him then, but something about the whole situation was starting to feel wrong.

**It was soon time for the group to split. They bowed to each other again and offered goodbyes.**

**Before they got too far, Xue Yang called out, “Xiao Xingchen!” The duo paused and looked back. Xue Yang grinned, “Don’t forget me.” He held up his bound hands, “We are meant to meet again.”**

**Neither replied as they walked away.**

**Nie Huaisang sighed, “They’re such decent people. Their integrity is undeniable.” Wei Wuxian’s expression fell into something like yearning, “So is their elegance.” He snapped his fan shut, “Alright. Let’s depart. Oh, Meng Yao,” He turned to his servant, “You must watch Xue Yang carefully.”**

**“Rest assured, Young Master.” Meng Yao smiled.**

**“Let’s go!” Nie Huaisang announced, turning to leave. With a pained look, Jiang Cheng followed.**

**After another moment, Wei Wuxian moved to leave, stopping when he noticed Lan Wangji continuing to stare. His voice lacked its usual exuberance when he asked, “Let’s go?”**

**Lan Wangji met his gaze, then nodded and turned.**

“Is that what you want, Wangji?” Lan Xichen murmured.

Did he want what Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan had?

Did he simply wish to wander with Wei Wuxian and confront any evil they found along the way? He couldn’t help but compare the two couples. Xiao Xingchen and Wei Wuxian both radiated similar warmth and friendliness. Song Lan and Wangji, in comparison, were colder, more closed off, but obviously dedicated and protective of their partner.

His brother didn’t answer, but he didn’t have to.

The answer was clear on his expression, both past and present.

He wanted his brother to be happy more than anything, but he never imagined his happiness would lead him away from Cloud Recesses.

Da-ge sent him a commiserating look, but there was little comfort in not being the only older brother completely surprised by the actions of his younger brother. He thought he knew everything about Wangji. If he didn’t...what else didn’t he know about those closest to him?

There was a reason A-Yao was kicked out of the Nie Sect, a reason neither of his sworn brothers talked about.

Did he not know them as well as he thought either?

## Chapter End Notes

"One man, scorned and covered with scars  
Still strove with his last ounce of courage  
To reach the unreachable star"

Ah, I love musicals. BTW, the next chapter will contain what I think Meng Yao was doing in Qinghe. If anyone has ideas, feel free to share. So far, I've basically moved XY's convo with XXC in Yi City up so XY talks with MY about why he killed the Chang Sect, but I'm still working out what went down between MY, XY, and the Captain. Next chapter might take a little longer accordingly.

Thank you all for your support and lovely comments! I'm sorry I only respond to comments if they have questions!

# Did You Have To Stab Him?

## Chapter Summary

JGY: You weren't there. You didn't hear what he said to me.

NMJ: What did he say?

JGY: What are you going to do, stab me?

JC: That's fair.

## Chapter Notes

I thoroughly dislike diverging from canon, but I didn't want everyone to turn on JGY like NMJ did, so I had to get creative. Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jin Guangshan stared at his bastard, examining him for any sign of discomfort.

They had never spoken of how he left the Nie Sect. He didn't need to know why Nie Mingjue hated his bastard. It was only an obstacle. He cared more for how Guangyao saved Lan Xichen and then infiltrated the Wen Sect. The time he spent as a Vice General, as a well respected servant, didn't matter to him more than the possibility of Guangyao having split allegiances.

Given Nie Mingjue's continued distrust, he doubted there was any love left between them.

It wouldn't do for his bastard to lose the trust of Lan Xichen as well. He knew how vicious and cutthroat the ambitious little demon could be. Hopefully, he knew better than to reveal that side to the general public.

Unless he was going to act pitiable and use it as a shield...

No, Guangyao knew no good would come of crossing him. Without his acknowledgement, he was just the son of a whore. He was a nobody. Even if Lan Xichen tried, there would be no protecting his bastard from his wrath should he invoke it.

He had never needed to threaten Guangyao before. He wondered if he should.

**The group finally arrived at the Unclean Realm. Meng Yao glanced back at their prisoner before signalling for the gates to be opened.**

**“This way,” Nie Huaisang gestured to his friends, and they entered. They made their way through the halls to the training grounds.**

**“These are newly deployed guards,” Meng Yao explained, “Your brother set them up. Nie-zongzhu strengthened the guard after receiving the Wen Sect’s message.”**

**“Message?” Nie Huaisang echoed.**

**“You must not know it yet,” Meng Yao continued, “Wen-zongzhu sent messages recently. All main Sects have to choose an inner heir disciple to accept indoctrination without delay. Or...” Wei Wuxian turned to look at Lan Wangji.**

**“Or what?” Nie Huaisang prompted.**

**“Or the Wen Sect will send people to take them,” Meng Yao finished.**

**“All the main Sects?” Jiang Cheng wondered, “That means we are included.”**

“How did Wei Wuxian end up there?” Jin Zixuan wondered.

“What?” Nie Huaisang frowned.

“How did Wei Wuxian end up at Indoctrination?” He straightened, “He wasn’t an heir and it would have been better not to send the Sect Heir and Head Disciple.”

After all, there was a reason Jin Zixun wasn’t sent with him. It was a balancing act. They needed to send disciples they could spare should the worst happen and war start while they were held hostage. The disciples sent also needed to be strong enough to survive whatever the Wen Sect was going to do to them.

Wei Wuxian shouldn’t have been sent if the Jiang Sect were smart. Considering Madam Yu was no fool, and Jiang Fengmian’s care for Wei Wuxian, he shouldn’t have been there.

“Wen Chao invited him,” His half-brother answered, “I assume his invitation was the same as yours.”

Unavoidable. Though he didn’t see what interest Wen Ruohan had in Wei Wuxian. Not back then. Maybe Wen Chao did invite him, but there was no way his father would have sent men to Lotus Pier to drag the son of a servant to Indoctrination. So once again, he was confused how Wei Wuxian ended up being held hostage with the rest of them.

**Jiang Cheng paused, “The Lan Sect has lectures. They came up with the indoctrination.”**

**“Disciples from various sects all rush to the Lan’s lecture,” Wei Wuxian muttered, “While they send a force to take people for indoctrination. It’s not accepting indoctrination, it’s being held as hostages.”**

**“Inner heir disciples...” Nie Huaisang trailed off, his eyes widening, “But...I’m the only inner heir disciple in the Nie Sect.” Meng Yao bowed his head, “What should I do?” He**

**snapped his fan shut, “No way. I have to ask my brother.”**

**At that moment, Nie Mingjue stepped down from the training grounds, “Ask me what?”**

**Everyone bowed, “Zongzhu.”**

**“This is Chifeng-Zun,” Jiang Cheng whispered to Wei Wuxian, “He lives up to his name.”**

**Noticing Nie Mingjue’s glance, Wei Wuxian ducked his head to reply, “No wonder Huaisang is afraid of him the most.” They both glanced at their friend with grins.**

Nie Mingjue grimaced, “Afraid of me the most?”

Huaisang half ducked behind his friend, who he realized retrospectively was there for that very reason. His little brother was scared of many things. Ghosts, monsters, large animals, his own saber...but to hear from his best friends, who knew him better than he thought, say he was scared of him most? It hurt.

It hurt more because so much pain could have been avoided if Huaisang just came to him with his true thoughts. If Huaisang told him his concerns about Wei Wuxian, or the truth about Wen Qing, he might have listened. Nie Mingjue was stubborn and obstinate. He got angry easily, but he would never hurt his brother.

Jiang Wanyin snorted.

He turned his glare on him, “Is that something to laugh about?”

“The matter is not as serious as Nie-zongzhu thinks,” Jiang Wanyin met his gaze steadily, “I would be flattered if my brother respected my opinion half as much as yours does.”

“You equate fear with respect,” Xichen noted.

“You misunderstand what is feared,” Jiang Wanyin’s expression darkened, “Nie-xiong has never feared being harmed. He fears-”

“Jiang-xiong,” Huaisang interrupted.

Nie Mingjue almost pushed the issue. Harmed wasn’t the same as hurt. Harmed meant his little brother didn’t think he would be attacked physically. There was little comfort since it did not address the hurt his words caused. What was Huaisang so scared of when it came to him? Why did he feel like he had to cower and hide?

What was he hiding?

**“Huaisang,” Nie Mingjue prompted, “What were you going to ask?”**

**There was an obvious difference between the Nie Huaisang who had travelled with the group and the young man in front of his brother. His voice was hard to hear as he**

**answered, “Nothing.” His friends snickered to the side.**

**Nie Mingjue shook his head, then moved down the line, “Jiang-gongzi. Wei-gongzi.” Wei Wuxian smiled, “Xichen told me that the two young masters of Yunmeng are teenage heroes. Now I see that you deserve that reputation.” Jiang Cheng started to smile as Wei Wuxian wrapped his arm around his shoulders.**

**Nie Mingjue then turned his attention to the end of the line, “Wangji, is everything okay with your brother?”**

**“Thank you for your concern,” Lan Wangji bowed his head, “He is alright.”**

**Finally, Nie Mingjue turned his attention to the criminal in their midst, “He is the one?”**

**“Exactly,” Meng Yao answered.**

**“Take him in,” Nie Mingjue ordered.**

**Meng Yao bowed, then gestured for the disciples to follow him.**

**“Please,” Nie Mingjue gestured them inside. Jiang Cheng went first, and Wei Wuxian hurried after so he could keep his arm around him. Lan Wangji followed a few steps behind. Nie Mingjue stared at his brother, who ducked his head, before flicking his robes and following behind.**

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes. He never understood Nie Huaisang’s need to hide, but Wei Wuxian just let him be weak. His savior complex was all too happy to have someone to help.

It wasn’t simply Nie Huaisang hiding from fighting. It was him hiding what he truly was good at and pretending to be useless that was starting to annoy him. Wei Wuxian always said Nie Huaisang was the smartest person he ever met. The more he watched the memories, and Nie Huaisang’s response to them, the more he thought he might have a point.

He understood hiding. It made the insults easier to bear if they could tell themselves the one insulting them didn’t know the full truth. Nie Huaisang could handle being called useless so long as he hid his useful talents.

Being rejected for who you were hurt so much more than being rejected for who you pretended to be.

Nie Mingjue hated scheming and manipulation, but Jiang Cheng thought maybe, maybe he could change his mind if he saw how much Nie Huaisang’s methods could accomplish.

**It skipped to Nie Mingjue sitting at his table. He hit it, “Xue Yang, you are so malicious. You should be cut into pieces.” The cultivators around the room shifted as he continued, “I’ll just execute him since the Yin Iron is not on him.” He slammed his hand on the table again, and his saber unsheathed itself to fly towards his head.**

**“Wait!” Wei Wuxian interjected, stopping the killing blow.**



**“What?” Nie Mingjue asked as the brothers from Lotus Pier rose, “Are you pleading for this scoundrel?”**

**Wei Wuxian moved in front of him, “Nie-zongzhu, everything is unclear now. It’s not too late to kill him until we make it clear.”**

**“I thought there was no doubt about the cause,” Nie Mingjue thundered.**

**“Da-ge,” Nie Huaisang interjected, but wilted under his direct attention.**

Lan Xichen noted this immediately.

Huaisang complained. He whined. He wheedled. He didn’t draw unnecessary attention to himself, not when Da-ge was angry. Not when they were talking about the Wen Sect or anyone associated with them. Not when Da-ge was trying a mass murderer. Not when Lan Xichen was in danger, and Da-ge was obviously worried.

He should have stayed silent.

But as soon as Da-ge raised his voice to Wei Wuxian, Huaisang spoke up.

Protected him. Just like he asked if their quest was punishment, and then suspiciously tagged along when Wei Wuxian couldn’t answer.

He was starting to dread what Lotus Pier under Jiang Fengmian was actually like, what else he hadn’t noticed because he thought too highly of the undeserving.

**“Nie-zongzhu,” Xue Yang spoke up, “If I’m really with the QishanWen, then execute me. I’m afraid the Nie Sect will have the same fate as the Chang Sect.”**

**“The Wen Sect has no humanity,” Nie Mingjue moved away from his table, “Violating nature’s will. I am a just and frank man. I fear nothing when I’m faced with sinners like you.” Everyone else moved with him to stand in front of Xue Yang.**

**Meng Yao turned to him, “Zongzhu, don’t be angry. Xue Yang is not a threat, but the Yin Iron is vital to several great Sects. Moreover, Xue Yang is in our hands, we can kill him anytime. We can take the opportunity to ask where the Yin Iron is.” Wei Wuxian nodded in agreement, “Wen Ruohan may not know that we have control over Xue Yang. We can keep it secret for a while. If we find the Yin Iron in advance, it’s a big loss to Qishan.”**

**“Meng Yao is quite good with words,” Jiang Cheng complimented, “What a smart guy.”**

**Nie Huaisang raised his fan to hide his whisper, “He really is. Da-ge values him so much.”**

**Wei Wuxian pointed at him, “Jin-zongzhu really can’t make use of such talent.”**

**Nie Mingjue seemed to come to a decision, “Meng Yao, take him into the dungeon. Watch him carefully and strengthen the guard.”**

**Meng Yao bowed, “Understood.”**

Jin Guangyao was used to people talking about him behind his back.

He was not used to that talk being complimentary.

He glanced at Sect Leader Jiang. Madam Yu was sworn sisters with Madam Jin. He assumed Jiang Wanyin would hold him in similar contempt as his father’s wife. It appeared it just lowered his and Wei Wuxian’s opinion of his father. He should have known. After all, this was a man who proclaimed the son of a servant as his brother, his equal.

This was a man who loved his adopted brother despite his mother’s undoubtable attempts to drive a wedge between them. Jiang Wanyin loved Wei Wuxian despite his own attempts to separate them.

The Jiang Sect’s lowered standards for acceptance were renowned, even before they were out of necessity. Now he wondered if the young Sect Leader truly didn’t care about someone’s birth status.

Jiang Wanyin met his gaze, and nodded.

What did that mean? He tentatively hoped for an ally. To him, his actions with the Wen attack and Xue Yang’s escape were justifiable. He did what he needed to do to survive. He wasn’t sure anyone else in the room could possibly understand, even with all they’d seen of Wei Wuxian’s life.

Maybe one person would be on his side. If Jiang Wanyin supported him, then so would Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan. And maybe...maybe Huaisang would continue to disagree with his brother if his friends did.

Huaisang was proving to be remarkably bold when his brother wasn’t around.

**The guards took Xue Yang away. Meng Yao led the way to the dungeons, but was blocked on the training grounds by the Nie disciples. He approached the captain, “Excuse me.”**

**“Stop!” The Captain called.**

**Meng Yao bowed shallowly, “Nie-zongzhu ordered to guard the dungeon with more people over the next few days. Please come with me to put him in custody.”**

**“Got it,” The Captain turned away.**

**“Sir, can you go with me now?” Meng Yao asked, “It’s Nie-zongzhu’s order.”**

**“Okay, Meng Yao,” The Captain turned back, “You just have to deal with trifles like greeting guests and cleaning the house. It’s not your job to arrange the forces.”**

**Meng Yao faltered, but smiled, “I know. You are in charge of all the force’s dispatches but...guarding the dungeon is important. Please don’t make trouble with me. If Chifeng-Zun were to punish me, I wouldn’t be able to take it.”**

**The Captain sneered, then stepped forward to pat his shoulder, “Then go be by the master’s side.”**

**Meng Yao bowed. The Captain didn’t return it, instead, going back to training. As he walked away, the Captain scoffed, “A whore’s son.” Meng Yao kept walking, but his smile was gone, “Don’t forget who you are.”**

“This is why I didn’t ask Wei-xiong to join the Nie Sect,” Nie Huaisang muttered.

“What?” MianMian frowned.

He fiddled with his fan, knowing nearly everyone was listening, “People treated him unfairly because of his parentage, but I...I thought the Nie Sect could do better. I thought it wouldn’t matter so much even if he was Jiang Fengmian’s bastard. For a long time, I thought Wei-xiong would have been happier...then San-ge joined the Sect.”

Wei Wuxian and Meng Yao were different people. Maybe Wei Wuxian would have done well anyways because he was gifted with weapons and cultivation.

Ha, he couldn’t convince himself of that in his own head.

“But it’s never about ability,” He continued bitterly, “It always comes back to birth.”

“What’s wrong with calling him the son of a whore?” Jin Zixun asked, “Is that not true?”

Nie Huaisang laughed, “When you use the word whore as though it were a crime, yes.” He set down his fan, narrowing his eyes at the arrogant asshole, “I’ve always thought the condemnation went to the wrong person. Why do we shame those who sell their bodies but say nothing to those who buy them?”

“Huaisang,” San-ge warned, shaking his head slightly to dissuade him from protecting him.

He had no idea what San-ge did to be kicked out of the Nie Sect. He still hesitated to think he deserved it, just as he didn’t deserve anyone else’s insult. He stood by as this happened in the past. He stood by as the cultivation world scorned Wei-xiong. What would the support of the pampered Young Master of Qinghe do?

But now he could force them to listen.

Nie Huaisang frowned, “What? Replace prostitute with mercenary. If you only punish the fighters, and never the one who hires them, you will always be attacked. Their employer will always find someone willing to sell themselves, someone desperate and without other means-”

“Nie-xiong,” Jiang Cheng interrupted, his eyes more sympathetic.

“What are you suggesting, Nie-er-gongzi?” Jin Guangshan asked.

“My brother suggests nothing new,” Da-ge spoke up, “If one condemns a practice, one should not support it.”

He glanced at his older brother, who met his gaze and inclined his head.

What was that supposed to mean? He didn’t think his brother approved of empty words or frivolous talk that wouldn’t lead to action.

**It went back to the five in the room, “As far as we know,” Nie Mingjue said, “All of the four Yin Iron shards have appeared.”**

**Wei Wuxian stepped forward, “Technically, only the three. No one has seen the one Xue Yang hid.”**

**Nie Mingjue whirled around, “Who knows Xue Yang’s background?”**

**Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji looked at each other. Nie Huaisang and Jiang Cheng shook their heads. Wei Wuxian started, “But...” He lowered his voice towards Lan Wangji, “His family name is Xue.”**

**“You mean, Xue Chonghai?” Nie Mingjue realized.**

**Jiang Cheng moved to stand next to his brother, “Xue Chonghai?”**

**“I’ll tell you later,” Wei Wuxian dismissed.**

**“You know?” Jiang Cheng demanded, but got elbowed.**

**Nie Huaisang hit his fan against his other hand.**

**“Except for the one with Xue Yang,” Nie Mingjue continued, “The Wen Sect now has two Yin Iron shards. Wen Chao exposed himself when he missed the first shot. Wen Ruohan will continue acting as his character.”**

Jiang Yanli pursed her lips, “Are we certain there are four pieces of the Yin Iron?”

“What?” Her brother stared at her, bewildered.

She sighed, “When was it ever said there were only four pieces of the Yin Iron?”

Perhaps it was only obvious to her. If A-Xian stole the Yin Iron off Xue Yang here, she would have noticed something when he came back to Lotus Pier. Some added security to his room, at least, once he left for Indoctrination. If he didn’t have it then, she doubted he would hunt Xue Yang down once the war started.

Both her brothers focused on the Wen Sect, on Wen Chao and Wen Zhuliu. She doubted A-Xian thought about Xue Yang after they lost Lotus Pier.

“Madam Jiang...” Zewu-Jun trailed off.

“It was never said,” Lianfeng-Zun admitted, “We presumed there were no more pieces.”

“Our record only speaks of the piece we hid,” Lan Qiren stroked his beard, “It would be dangerous to have too many pieces scattered around.”

“But it would also mean no one could ever have the complete Yin Iron,” Zewu-Jun hummed.

“A-Li,” Her father-in-law looked interested, “This could mean Wei Wuxian acquired his Yin Iron somewhere else. Do you remember any artifact that fits the description?”

She paused for a moment, “There may have been something...”

His gaze focused on her. She was grateful for that, as he missed the way her husband stiffened and sent an alarmed glance towards her brother. Hanguang-Jun too reacted, his eyes just slightly widening in horror.

Jiang Yanli shook her head, “No. I don’t think so.”

Her father-in-law was disappointed, but he was no longer angry at Nie Huaisang’s earlier insult.

If there was one thing she was good at, it was distracting angry elders.

**“We are meant to have a serious battle with the Wen Sect,” Jiang Cheng gathered.**

**Nie Mingjue nodded seriously.**

**“Actually,” Wei Wuxian moved again, “The problem can be solved if we make the Yin Iron shard into a weapon to counter the Wen Sect’s Yin Iron.”**

**“It’s easier said than done,” Jiang Cheng shot down immediately, earning himself another elbow.**

**“The great cultivators couldn’t even repress it thousands of years ago,” Nie Mingjue turned away, “The talented Lan Sect Leader, Lan Yi, couldn’t have done that either. This is my advice to you,” He turned back, “As a disciple of a decent Sect, don’t try evil things.”**

**Wei Wuxian just smiled nervously.**

Lan Wangji thought back to all the conversations he had with Wei Ying.

The sword. The one he used against the Xuanwu. The one he refused to let go of, even after days of unconsciousness. The one he clung to like a dead man. He remembered his feverish words of hearing screams when he fought with it.

He remembered his later confession of that sword being Yin Iron.

By then, Lan Wangji was too concerned about the Stygian Tiger Amulet to care about the confession. It mattered little that Wei Ying told him a potential lie about where he got the material compared to the dangerous task of refining it Wei Ying undertook alone. He was more betrayed at the amulet's existence after he promised to let him help.

By then, he knew better than to listen to his words.

**Nie Huaisang darted forward, "So what do we do with this Yin Iron shard?" He glanced around, "And does the Wen Sect know that you are at the Unclean Realm?"**

**Wei Wuxian crossed his arms, "Wen Chao has followed us all the way, have they found out that we took Xue Yang?"**

**Nie Huaisang gasped, "Will the Unclean Realm be in danger?"**

Nie Mingjue didn't miss how Huaisang once again placed himself between Wei Wuxian and someone angry at him.

He also didn't miss how Huaisang was the first to realize an attack was imminent. He was also the first to realize the Fairy Statue was a trap.

He never thought his brother was an idiot, but it was another matter to realize he was this smart. Was this why he was so close to Meng Yao? Could his words be stronger than his saber, if only he were allowed to wield them freely?

He closed his eyes briefly. It would hurt Huaisang to see why Meng Yao was sent away.

**Nie Mingjue turned back, "Wangji, Xichen told me in the letter that he found records of the Yin Iron in forbidden books. Now you'd better take it to Gusu to see if you can get rid of this problem."**

**Lan Wangji bowed as the brothers exchanged another look, "Understood."**

They were building up to another major event.

The Wen attack on the Unclean Realm. Xue Yang's escape. Then the attack on Cloud Recesses.

After that, the Sect Heirs would go to Indoctrination, leading to their dramatic escape and Hanguang-Jun fighting the Xuanwu of Slaughter with Wei Wuxian.

**It was dark and Meng Yao stood in the dungeons. He dismissed the guards with a wave, and stared at the bound Xue Yang.**

**Meng Yao's smile didn't change, "Why did you kill the Chang Sect?"**

**"Only the Chang Sect?" Xue Yang grinned.**

**"Hm," Meng Yao hummed, "You were more vicious there. You lingered. You got sloppy and you got caught." He took a step forward, "So yes, let's start with the Chang Sect."**

**Xue Yang tilted his head, “My reasons for killing the Chang Sect were personal.” He strained forward against his restraints, “Can’t you guess them, Meng Yao? From what the guards say about you, I think you could understand.”**

Madam Jin glanced at the bastard.

He wasn’t the humble servant he appeared to be. There was an ambitious snake beneath his meek facade. In some ways, he was more like his father than her own son. He didn’t reveal his dark side to the public even though everyone was aware he tormented people for Wen Ruohan. He did so well he gained the disgraced Sect Leader’s trust in a matter of months.

“I didn’t know you interrogated him,” Zewu-Jun commented.

The bastard didn’t respond.

She narrowed his eyes. He never made mistakes. If he had, she would have a reason to throw him down the steps of Koi Tower herself. He agreed to show this, meaning he thought he could justify his actions or weaponize his vulnerability. He had Zewu-Jun to protect him, after all. Why not try to garner sympathy by looking pathetic?

She wouldn’t let him weasel his way out of more crimes.

**Meng Yao stared at him, his smile fading a little, “Someone in the Chang Sect was responsible for your finger.” He guessed, his gaze flickering to the prosthetic, “Or lack thereof.”**

**“Their Sect Leader,” Xue Yang spat, “The esteemed Chang-zongzhu himself! He used to hand out candies to the street children. I was a naive, trusting fool. I would chase after his carriage for handouts.” His expression twisted, “One day, my screams must have irritated him. He struck me down, and ordered his carriage to run over my hand.”**

**“He broke every single one of my fingers, and the last one was completely crushed,” The criminal fell back, “So I slaughtered his entire Sect. I didn’t even allow a dog to live! They got what was coming to them.”**

So that was his backstory.

“Insane.”

“Completely mad.”

And yet...

“His malice didn’t come from nowhere.”

Lan Qiren fought back a lecture about revenge. He wanted to say there was no crime worthy of an entire Sect’s destruction, but is that not what they had done to the Wen Sect? If Wei Wuxian were to be believed, every person with the surname Wen was put in camps and worked to death. All for the crimes of the cultivators amongst them.

Xichen would never be so callous, but he imagined what would happen if Wei Wuxian were a little more resentful. If he remembered Lan Qiren's mistakes, how he mistreated him in Gusu.

If Wei Wuxian came for his life with the power of the Yin Iron, would his Sect die to protect him? Xue Yang said he came for the whole Chang Sect, but even if he just went for the Chang Sect Leader, the man was like many of the minor Sect Leaders. He wouldn't be able to protect himself.

Xichen and Wangji would certainly fight for his sake, and they would fall. So would others, because what was the Lan Sect without the Lan Clan?

**Meng Yao didn't react to his vehemence, "All because you lost a finger?"**

**Xue Yang laughed, "Of course! The finger was mine and their lives were theirs. It's not even equivalent." He leaned back, "Didn't Jin-zongzhu kick you down the stairs of Koi Tower? Humiliate you in front of everyone?" He paused, then tilted his head, "Is that why you're here, Meng Yao?"**

**Meng Yao smiled tightly, "You think I want revenge on the Jin Sect?" The smile fell, his entire demeanor sharpening, "I'm not like you."**

**"What? You're not tired of being called a whore's son?" Xue Yang asked, "Don't you want revenge for every time they look down on you? All these self-righteous cultivators, they think they're better than everyone else. Just because we weren't born with a name or fancy title, they treat us like nothing. Is that fair? Is that righteous?"**

**"I'd rather be disrespected than disgraced," Meng Yao turned away, "Is that all you've got, Xue Yang? You think I'm going to let you go because the world's unfair?"**

**"You're going to let me go!" Xue Yang called after him.**

**Meng Yao turned back, "Why would I do that? Ambitiously seeking revenge...how reckless. You have a piece of the Yin Iron. You have a place of honor in the Wen Sect. You can prove yourself and they will accept you, just as they accepted Wen Zhuliu. Wen Chao has desperately chased Lan-er-gongzi trying to prove he is better-"**

**He cut himself off when he noticed the Captain vomiting in the nearby courtyard.**

Jin Zixuan flinched. It made too much sense.

Xue Yang spoke openly with his half-brother because they both suffered under the way things were. His half-brother said he didn't want revenge on the Jin Sect, but that was only because he still thought he could be accepted by them. His words dripped with jealousy. Because Xue Yang held the position he wanted but threw it all away for petty revenge.

Is this what Guangyao would become if he got the Yin Iron? If he had the power to respond to every slight?

People started whispering about Jin Guangyao, judging him for his ambition and empathy.



It was unfair. If his half-brother ignored his parentage, he was deceitful. If he pretended like it didn't matter, he was shameless. He wasn't considered a part of their family. How his mother treated him displayed that daily. Even at this celebration, he was acting as the Master of Ceremony, a position of a servant, not a family member.

But he could fix that.

"Brother," He spoke the word slowly, testing it out. What should he address him as anyways? They were born the same day. It was impossible to know which of them was the elder. He felt like his half-brother was older, but he simply had more experience. He wasn't sheltered. He actually had friends amongst their peers.

It would probably be best to refer to him as younger. It would make his mother happier and lessen the talk of him usurping his position as the next Jin Sect Leader.

Even if Guangyao did know more about running a Sect.

"Yes..." Guangyao trailed off, "Brother?"

He didn't know what to say. Luckily for him, his wife was perfect in all situations.

She handed him their son, and he hastily rose, "You haven't held your nephew."

"A-Xuan," His mother warned.

He handed his son over without heeding her, lowering his voice, "You didn't help Xue Yang escape, did you?"

Jin Guangyao carefully cradled the tiny infant, before sighing, "A little?"

"I can work with a little," He patted his shoulder.

After all, whose fault was it that his half-brother was the son of a prostitute? It couldn't be his. No one could control their parentage. If their father wasn't going to do right by him, and he was forced to do something terrible because of the circumstances he was left in...wasn't that partially their father's fault?

His father wasn't going to help him, so he needed to.

They were doing this to give Jin Ling back his uncle, not deprive him of a different one.

**Meng Yao's eyes narrowed briefly, and he descended to go talk to the Captain. He bowed, "Captain."**

**"Who were you talking to?" The Captain demanded.**

**Meng Yao feigned surprise, shaking his head, "Nobody."**

**"What were you doing then?" The Captain followed up.**

**“I was just guarding the prisoner,” Meng Yao answered, “According to Nie-zongzhu’s orders.”**

**“You’re lying!” The Captain grabbed his robes, “I just saw that. You were talking. Tell me honestly. What’s your ulterior motive?”**

**“You’ve misunderstood me, Captain,” Meng Yao took his hand off. He turned to the other disciple, “He’s too drunk. Get him back to his room.”**

**The Captain brushed off the other disciple, then shoved his way past Meng Yao, “Whore’s son.”**

**Meng Yao straightened as soon as he was alone, adjusting his robes.**

Nie Mingjue was starting to understand why the Captain got stabbed.

He thought it was just insults, but he could see now that it was also the blatant disregard for Meng Yao’s authority. He noted the lack of guards around Xue Yang, and the way they responded to Meng Yao’s dismissal. These weren’t disciples under the Captain’s orders. The Captain got obnoxiously drunk despite his order for vigilance.

Still, he didn’t deserve death.

If Meng Yao had just been honest with him, he could have given him justice.

**When Meng Yao turned, he saw Wei Wuxian wandering towards him, “Wei-gongzi. Why are you here?”**

**“I got my liquor,” He held up the jar, “And got lost on the way back. Why don’t you go to the feast?”**

**“I have to keep an eye on Xue Yang,” Meng Yao answered.**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, then bowed, “Thanks for your efforts.”**

**Meng Yao smiled, returning the bow, “This way.”**

“Do you think he was trying to get to Xue Yang?” Su She asked.

Nie Huaisang scoffed, “With the amount he drank? I’m surprised he could walk.”

“He didn’t make it back to our room,” Jiang Wanyin glanced at Jin Guangyao.

Jin Guangyao just smiled, “I assure you I got him to the guest quarters.”

“He slept on the roof,” Lan Wangji informed them bluntly.

“Oh?” Nie Huaisang opened his fan, “I’m sure it’s all completely appropriate.”

“Isn’t it always?” Jiang Wanyin scowled.

**The memory switched to Lan Wangji meditating in his room. Despite the late hour, he was fully dressed. Something drew his attention, and he grabbed his sword.**

**A voice came from outside, “The Qinghe’s roof tiles are tougher than the ones in Gusu. It’s so rocky.”**

**Realizing it was just Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji smiled and stepped out into the courtyard. He spotted Wei Wuxian off to one side, lounging casually with his alcohol.**

**“The world is a huge room,” Wei Wuxian said, “I’ll take the sky as my quilt, and the ground as my matting.” He poured more of his drink into his mouth as Lan Wangji closed the doors behind him, “Lan Zhan, I’ll sleep on your roof tonight.” Then he leaned back and closed his eyes.**

**Lan Wangji’s smile widened minutely, “Wei Ying, I have to go.” His voice was almost a whisper as he stared at the sleeping man. Then he left.**

Completely appropriate.

Even if there was another round of whispering about how smitten Hanguang-Jun was.

Even if Hanguang-Jun may have wanted something inappropriate to happen.

Jin Guangyao looked down at the infant in his arms. This...wasn’t so appropriate. Jin Zixuan called him brother...he assumed it was his way of showing his support. He was grateful to be holding his nephew. No one would dare attack him while he had the reason for their gathering in his arms. Still, Madam Jin hated him. His ‘brother’s’ support would fade when her hatred didn’t.

There was a divide between him and Jin Zixuan. As they said earlier, one was raised in heaven, the other in hell. His half-brother was afforded every opportunity and luxury under the sun. He had to endlessly fight to be awarded basic respect.

It was insurmountable.

Even if a part of him wanted to be this baby’s uncle. There would be years before a child’s mind could understand the meaning of ‘bastard’ and years after that before he learned what a prostitute was. There would be a blissful time where he was just his uncle, just family.

**The next morning, Jiang Cheng searched his room, “Wei Wuxian!” He called out, scowling at his disappearance, “That Wei Wuxian...Where did he go again?” He turned to search somewhere else, and ran into a yawning Wei Wuxian, “Where did you go last night?” Jiang Cheng demanded.**

**“No idea,” Wei Wuxian sniffed, “I was possibly drunk.”**

**“Come with me,” Jiang Cheng ordered, “Something happened.”**

**“What’s wrong?” Wei Wuxian stopped him from charging off.**

**“Do we have some other problem?” Jiang Cheng snarked, “The Wen Sect is coming for us.” Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened as his brother tugged on his sleeve, “Go.”**

And so the attack on the Unclean Realm began with many of the key characters of the Sunshot Campaign there.

Chifeng-Zun, the general who led them to victory.

Meng Yao, before he became Lianfeng-Zun, the spy turned assassin who paved the way for their attack on the Nightless City and then killed Wen Ruohan.

And finally, Wei Wuxian, who stopped the Yin Iron from destroying them.

**Before the gates of the Unclean Realm, Nie Mingjue stood with a contingent of his disciples. Nie Huaisang and Meng Yao flanked him.**

**“Wen-er-gongzi, what brought you here?” Nie Mingjue asked.**

**Wen Chao examined his sword, “Nie-zongzhu, His Excellency was quite angry when he heard about the Yin Iron and the massacre of the Chang Sect.” The Nie disciples exchanged looks, “It was supposed to be left to His Excellency and shouldn’t be interfered with by some nameless Sect randomly.”**

**“Nie-zongzhu, I just came to deliver the message today,” Wen Chao pointed, “And give you a chance. Hand over Xue Yang and the Yin Iron shard and I will spare you for exceeding your duties.”**

**Nie Mingjue sneered, “I’m afraid I can’t obey that.”**

**Wen Chao smirked, “Nie Mingjue, don’t refuse a toast, only to drink a forfeit.”**

**When the enemy moved closer, Nie Mingjue withdrew his saber and sent it forward, stopping Wen Chao from coming any closer.**

**“Good move!” Nie Huaisang cheered on. Meng Yao smirked and glanced at the smaller man.**

**Wen Chao stepped back, “Very well. It seems the QingheNie are going to stand with the evil GusuLan. How exaggerated. Now that you don’t regret it, I’ll eradicate evil for His Excellency.”**

**He stepped back again, and Nie Mingjue threw himself forward, summoning his saber back into his hand. Wen Zhuliu met him head on, and they began to fight.**

**Meng Yao frowned as the fight continued, darting over to Nie Huaisang, “Huaisang, I must check on Xue Yang.”**

Immediately, there were whispers.

Xue Yang was certain Meng Yao would let him out, and here he was, leaving to go find him during the attack. Maybe this was the reason he no longer worked for the Nie Sect. Maybe this was the reason there was always tension between the two sworn brothers.

Did Meng Yao help Xue Yang escape?

If so, what did it say about his investigation into the Yin Iron and Xue Yang?

Lan Xichen's hands curled into fists beneath the table. He tried to catch A-Yao's eye, but he was focused on his nephew. Even now, the thought of him genuinely betraying Da-ge was unbelievable. After this, A-Yao rushed to Gusu to help save him. After this, he risked everything to be a spy.

He wouldn't side with evil here.

**"Meng Yao..." Nie Huaisang started, but the servant was already making his way back inside, and Nie Huaisang worriedly turned back to the fight.**

**Nie Mingjue and Wen Zhuliu continued to exchange blows, but Wen Chao turned his attention to the rest of them, "Kill them!" He ordered.**

**This was the sight Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng arrived at. Nie disciples were fighting Wen disciples in the corridors of the Unclean Realm. They paused, taking in the chaos as someone yelled, "Fetch the guards in the dungeon to help us!"**

**"Jiang Cheng, go find Xue Yang," Wei Wuxian ordered, "I'll find Chifeng-zun."**

**Jiang Cheng nodded, and they split up.**

Removing the possibility that Wei Wuxian got the Yin Iron from Xue Yang.

Unless...but no. There was no reason for him to lie here. Not like his other lies, and it did make sense. Wei Wuxian was stronger, and Wen Zhuliu was the bigger threat. He handled Xue Yang with ease, meaning he wasn't a threat to Jiang Wanyin.

Nie Mingjue was also likely to be closer to where Nie Huaisang was, and he had made a promise to protect him earlier, as long as he was around.

Wei Wuxian thought about using the Yin Iron, but he made no attempts to acquire it for himself.

**Meng Yao stood in front of the dungeon again, looking down at the dead guards. He frowned, then turned and went in a different direction.**

**Nie Mingjue was still fighting Wen Zhuliu, neither able to get the advantage over the other. When Nie Mingjue glanced away, he noticed Meng Yao picking up a Wen sword as he hurried around the corner into another room. Before he could follow, Wen Zhuliu threw his sword, forcing him to stop and continue the fight.**

**When Meng Yao entered the room, it was to the sight of Xue Yang facing off against the Captain and two other guards. Xue Yang killed the other two, resentment pouring off of him, and turned his attention to fighting off the Captain.**

**Meng Yao's grip tightened on the sword, before he ran in between the two, blocking a blow meant for Xue Yang.**

"What are you doing?" Nie Huaisang couldn't look away from the projection.

Meng Yao had betrayed them, but for what? What did he gain by letting Xue Yang escape? He didn't know Jin Guangshan would lust after the power of the Yin Iron then, and he obviously didn't do this in exchange for any favors otherwise why would they still be desperately looking for Xue Yang? Why turn the world against Wei-xiong if they had their own Yin Iron.

It didn't make sense.

"What was necessary," San-ge answered.

"You helped him escape!" Da-ge slammed his hand on his table.

"The Wen Sect attacked because he was there," San-ge argued, "If we lost, Xue Yang would be taken by the Wen Sect. If we won, it would have been the start of a siege we could not have afforded. Not with our closest ally also in peril. As long as Xue Yang was there, we were in danger."

"So you let him go?" Da-ge thundered, "What if he went to the Wen Sect anyway?"

"He already said his business with them was done," San-ge clutched his nephew closer to him, the baby's presence the only reason he wasn't shouting as well, "He never planned to go back to them. He's insane, yes, but his hands were better than Wen Ruohan's."

"Choosing the lesser of two evils is still choosing evil, A-Yao," Er-ge interjected softly.

Jiang Cheng scoffed, "What choice do you see, Zewu-Jun? How did the rest of the Major Sects fair against the Wen Sect alone?" What conversation in the room died at the reminder. Cloud Recesses burned. The Jiang Sect was massacred. His friend glared, "Are you so hypocritical as to condemn Lianfeng-Zun for the same choice Hanguang-Jun made?"

"It's different," Da-ge turned his glare on the younger Sect Leader.

"How?" Jiang Cheng demanded petulantly, "If anything, I would praise Lianfeng-Zun for his quick thinking. Hanguang-Jun traded the Yin Iron for the safety of his Sect. Lianfeng-Zun kept the Yin Iron out of the Wen Sect's hands and prevented the Unclean Realm from suffering further damage."

"Can Jin Guangyao see the future?" Jin Zixun joined the discussion, "No one else had been attacked yet."

Nie Huaisang straightened, "No one else? What of all the minor Sects that were killed?"

There was no reason for San-ge to have betrayed them back then. Therefore, San-ge didn't betray them.

He saved them.

**“You!” The Captain growled.**

**Meng Yao pushed him back, barely turning as he spoke to Xue Yang, “Don't let the Wen Sect capture you.”**

**Xue Yang grinned and hurriedly left.**

**“Oh no!” Meng Yao raised his voice, “Xue Yang has escaped!”**

**Around the corner, Nie Mingjue heard his shout, “What?!”**

**Inside the room, the Captain advanced towards Meng Yao, who raised his sword warily.**

**“You little snake,” The Captain spat, “I knew you were a traitor. Whore's son, wait until Nie-zongzhu knows you let Xue Yang-”**

**The Captain didn't get to finish, because Meng Yao stabbed him in the heart.**

Many were stunned into silence.

Lianfeng-Zun was...polite. Intelligent. Humble. He rarely raised his voice and was the first to intercede in disagreements. Yes, he acted as a spy. Yes, his role in the Wen Sect was to torture, but he did what was needed. War was messy, and as long as he sided with the righteous side, his actions could be forgiven.

Letting Xue Yang go could be overlooked considering it may have saved the Nie Sect.

This...this was murder.

**“Meng Yao!” Nie Mingjue shouted, stopping in the entrance to watch as Meng Yao withdrew the blade.**

**Meng Yao dropped it immediately, “It wasn't me.” He lied, terrified, “It wasn't me.” His eyes widened as he looked down to Nie Mingjue's saber, “It's not my fault. It's not my fault,” He pleaded, pointing to the Captain, “Xue Yang killed him.”**

**“A-Yao,” Lan Xichen couldn't bring himself to say more words.**

A-Yao helped Xue Yang escape. His reasons were good, but what justifiable reason was there for murder? The Captain hadn't even attacked him yet. It wasn't self-defense.

**“You really are a snake,” Madam Jin narrowed her eyes, “A murderer and a liar.”**

**“He was scared,” Jiang Yanli protested.**

**“Fear isn't an excuse,” Da-ge growled.**

The new mother straightened in her seat, “Nie-zongzhu doesn’t know what it’s like to be afraid. He is strong. He has power and respect. He was born with them. They’re tied to his title, his birthright.” She lifted her chin, “He has never depended on the goodwill of another to be treated with basic decency. He doesn’t fear his life being upended because of one man’s bad temper.”

“A-Li...” Jin Zixuan held her hand, “I will not disrespect you.”

But what if he did? What if she ended up like Madam Jin? What if she was the Madam of Koi Tower in name, but in effect powerless? Madam Jin couldn’t properly censure her own husband for his hedonistic tendencies. She couldn’t send A-Yao away without her husband’s approval.

Was that not similar to A-Yao? Everything in his life depended on another.

He thought back to Xue Yang’s story. Running over the child’s hand was nothing to Sect Leader Chang, but it was everything to the child. A-Yao had his position in the Nie Sect because he had Da-ge’s favor. Da-ge’s temper was infamous. All it took was one bad day, and A-Yao’s life would be changed forever.

“You dare to justify what is obviously murder?” Madam Jin raised her eyebrows.

“What were his options?” Huaisang wondered, “Tell Da-ge he didn’t think we could beat the Wens? Even I couldn’t do that. And if Da-ge did listen, the Captain wouldn’t keep quiet about this. How long before rumors started about how San-ge got so close to him, and whether their closeness was appropriate given who his mother was-”

“Huaisang!” Lan Xichen couldn’t hear more.

“A-Xuan,” Madam Jin stared at her son, “You would let a murderer hold A-Ling?”

Jin Zixuan looked conflicted, before he took a deep breath, “If the Captain levied treason charges against Guangyao, it would have cost him his life. I’m willing to see this as self-defense.”

“Guangshan!” She turned to her husband.

Jin Guangshan merely took a drink, seeming completely unmoved by what he’d seen, “A man can only withstand so many insults.”

Madam Jin huffed, but fell silent. This only proved Jiang Yanli’s point. When one’s power and comfort depended entirely on another, it would only lead to frustration and rash action.

**Meng Yao glanced behind the Sect Leader, his eyes widening at the sight of Wen Zhuliu.**

**“Watch out!” Meng Yao shouted, diving between the incoming attack and Nie Mingjue. He took the sword to the chest, falling back.**

**Nie Mingjue supported him with one arm, “Meng Yao...”**



“A traitor wouldn’t do that,” Su Minshan commented.

Many in the crowd were confused. One moment Meng Yao was acting in the best interest of the Nie Sect. Then he killed the Captain to protect his own best interests. Then he nearly died to stand between Chifeng-Zun and the enemy.

Could lives be weighed on a scale? Was karma balanced so easily? He killed the Captain but nearly died to save Chifeng-Zun, therefore he was allowed to leave?

**Wen Chao attacked him when his focus was once again on his servant, disrupting his qi. Nie Mingjue struggled to kneel as Wen Chao announced, “Stop!” He smirked, “Nie-zongzhu, Qinghe is at the foot of Qishan. Now you are under my feet.”**

**Wen Zhuliu pulled him back when Wei Wuxian arrived, “Nie-zongzhu,” He supported him to his feet. Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang arrived at the same time.**

**“Da-ge,” Nie Huaisang worried.**

**“Wen Chao,” Wei Wuxian addressed, “It’s QingheNie’s territory. Don’t be so prideful.”**

**“Wei Wuxian, you do like meddling,” Wen Chao replied, confident behind his guard dog. Wei Wuxian took a moment to look closer at Nie Mingjue’s condition, as Wen Chao continued, “Since you are interested in the Lan’s stuff...well, let me tell you, my brother has brought a fight against Gusu.”**

**“If Lan Wangji managed to go back to Gusu,” Both Nie Huaisang and Nie Mingjue glanced at Wei Wuxian, “What do you think he would see?” Wei Wuxian’s confidence wavered, “Cloud Recesses in ruins!”**

**“Lan-zongzhu,” Meng Yao worriedly muttered.**

An evil person wouldn’t be concerned with the fate of a man he’d talked to twice.

And yet...

Lan Wangji sighed. They didn’t live in an ideal world. One couldn’t eat honor. Honor wouldn’t keep someone warm in the winter, or wet a parched throat. The needs of the body must be fulfilled before one could focus on the needs of the soul.

He couldn’t fault Jin Guangyao for surviving, when his entire life had been about survival. He could, however, distrust him. The Captain was an easy sacrifice so he could stay in Nie Mingjue’s good graces, no matter that it backfired. What would he do now to stay on his father’s good side?

What had he already done that he wouldn’t dare show them?

**“The three Yin Iron shards will be ours sooner or later,” Wen Chao gloated.**

**“You villain,” Nie Mingjue snarled, but both Nie Huaisang and Wei Wuxian stopped him from continuing to fight.**

**“Nie Mingjue,” Wen Chao said, “You offended the Wen Sect today for some tragic lad who hid the Yin Iron. We haven’t displayed our power for a long time. So you, the main Sects, don’t remember how to respect us now. I’ll spare you today, but if this happens again, your Qinghe will be the next Cloud Recesses.”**

**“As for you,” Wen Chao addressed, “Wei Wuxian, my father said to let you go to Qishan. I’m going to enjoy the time with you then.”**

**Wei Wuxian shared a glance with Jiang Cheng.**

**“Let’s go!” Wen Chao decided, turning to leave.**

**Nie Mingjue waited for them to be gone before spitting up blood. Nie Huaisang clutched his arm tighter, “Da-ge!”**

**Nie Mingjue glanced at Meng Yao, who was leaning against the wall on the floor, clutching his stab wound, “Huaisang,” He panted, “Bring Meng Yao before me.” Nie Huaisang glanced at the servant, “Go!” Nie Mingjue hobbled away with Wei Wuxian’s support. Nie Huaisang helped Meng Yao to his feet.**

**In the end, there was little anyone wanted to do to Jin Guangyao about this.**

**It wasn’t as though he were genuinely respected to begin with. He had many important responsibilities, but it wasn’t the same as being important. The minor Sect Leaders preferred working with him because they could demand more from a bastard than they ever dared from the Sect Leader himself. He was also eager to please, to prove himself.**

**He wanted to be useful, and that meant being used.**

**So what if he harbored resentment? He would drown in the blood of everyone who called him a son of a whore. There was no way he could manage to kill so many people.**

**There was no reason to kick up a fuss about this. The death of an incompetent Captain, who couldn’t organize a guard to keep the prisoner in his cell nor join his Sect Leader in facing the Wens...it was nothing in the grand scheme of things.**

**Madam Jin scowled. They would regret underestimating that bastard.**

**It skipped to later in the day. Nie Huaisang paced outside the building, hitting his fan against the palm of his hand.**

**Inside, Meng Yao was on the floor before Nie Mingjue. He crawled closer, “Zongzhu, please, wait. Please listen to my explanation.”**

**“What do you have to explain?” Nie Mingjue growled.**

**“I had to do that,” Meng Yao defended.**

**“Why did you have to?” Nie Mingjue demanded.**

**“Zongzhu,” Meng Yao pleaded, “You promoted me to Vice General, but the Captain always looked down on me. Insulting, beating, and humiliating me-”**

**“So you killed him!” Nie Mingjue interrupted.**

**“No!” Meng Yao shook his head, “Not because of that. Looking down on me, or insulting me, I can take it. But I can’t...I can’t take how he takes credit for what I’ve done. Not only once. Just now, just a moment earlier, I saw him let go of Xue Yang. I argued with him. Every time he humiliated my mother, he said...”**

**Nie Mingjue darted forward to yank him to his feet, “You are lying.”**

**“It’s true,” Meng Yao insisted, holding up three fingers, “All of my words are true.”**

**“Just a little credit,” Nie Mingjue tightened his grip on his robes, “Why do you care about vain honor so much?” He threw him back, “Tell me, Meng Yao, when we first met, did you pretend to be delicate and poor so that I might lend a hand to help you? If I hadn’t stood up for you, would you have killed them all like today?”**

**“I-”**

**“Don’t lie to me!” Nie Mingjue interrupted, stabbing his saber into the floor.**

**“Why couldn’t he just be honest?” Nie Mingjue whispered.**

Lady Luo glanced at him, before sighing, “Would you have listened?”

He almost snapped at her, but he forced himself to consider the question. Meng Yao killed for selfish reasons. For some reason, Huaisang and Jin Zixuan equated selfishness with self-preservation. Madam Jiang sympathized with his fear, his powerlessness.

But he wasn’t powerless. If he had just told him...

Did he not know the power he had back then? That he could still have if he gave up his ambitions and settled for being a good man?

“I say this with the utmost respect, Nie-zongzhu,” Lady Luo continued, “But being part of the gentry without the right name or background...it’s like playing a game we’re rigged to lose. We try so hard to make something of ourselves, but eventually we realize we will never win. So we either quit or break the rules.”

He scowled, "Cheating is a light way to describe murder."

“Is it cheating if the system is itself unfair?” She challenged, then looked away, “I’m not defending murder, but you expect far more of Lianfeng-Zun than his circumstances allow. By doing so, you set yourself up for disappointment. Why would he be honest if you will never understand his truth?”

Was that why those closest to him kept lying?

**“I don’t regret having met you in my life,” Meng Yao said while kneeling, “Chifengzun.” He closed his eyes and smiled.**

**Nie Mingjue raised the blade, but lowered it after a moment’s thought, “Since you saved me today, I won’t harm you.” He sheathed his saber, “Go away. It doesn’t matter if you go to the Jin Sect or other places, don’t ever come back.”**

**“Zongzhu,” Meng Yao pleaded, but this time Nie Mingjue closed his eyes.**

**Meng Yao forced himself to his feet and bowed, “I am...grateful for your kindness in adopting me.” He sniffled, as though he were fighting back tears, staring at the Nie Sect Leader in hope he would look back. He took a shaky breath in, then turned and left.**

None of this made sense.

Lan Xichen was left conflicted. He couldn’t overlook A-Yao’s actions, but he also couldn’t condemn him. The cold fury in his eyes wasn’t something he recognized. The man who killed a man with a blank expression, only reacting when he was caught...that wasn’t the A-Yao he knew.

Was this how Da-ge saw A-Yao? Was this why he couldn’t trust him?

Yet this was the same man who would go straight to help him. This killer saved him, hid him when he was incapacitated, went to spy in the Wen Sect without him even suggesting it. He poured so much money into the Lan Sect so they could rebuild.

He kept his dark side so well hidden, but it wasn’t all there was to him.

**Nie Huaisang looked up hopefully as Meng Yao exited. Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian entered the courtyard, watching as Nie Huaisang darted forward, “Meng Yao,” He gently gripped him, “Are you okay, Meng Yao?”**

**“From now on, I can’t take care of you, Gongzi,” Meng Yao apologized, “Gongzi, you need to work hard. Do not make Zongzhu angry anymore.”**

**“What?” Nie Huaisang asked, his hands falling back to his sides.**

**Jiang Cheng glanced at Wei Wuxian, who just crossed his arms.**

**“Zongzhu has ordered me to leave the Unclean Realm at once,” Meng Yao reported.**

**Nie Huaisang grabbed him again, “Why?”**

**Meng Yao smiled, “Zongzhu has made up his mind.” He pushed his hands down so he could properly bow, “Farewell.” He walked past Jiang Cheng, but stopped before Wei Wuxian to bow, then turned back to bow to Jiang Cheng.**

Jiang Yanli’s breath caught in her throat.

A-Xian's expression was burned into her memory, and she couldn't help but feel this was a turning point for brother and brother-in-law.

Xue Yang reminded Meng Yao how precarious his position was. How his life, his position, depended on one man's mood. That fear led to terrible action.

Now A-Xian was watching a loved servant be dismissed after taking a heavy blow. He must have thought of his own situation. She kept watching this, waiting to see what they'd done to make him think they would abandon him, that he couldn't trust them with his troubles.

Was it not something they'd done but his observations of others?

**Nie Huaisang watched him go, then ran into the room, "Da-ge," He leaned against the desk, "Meng Yao said you drove him out, What on earth is going on here? Da-ge-"**

**"Sit down," Nie Mingjue ordered, interrupting him, "Where are your manners?"**

**Nie Huaisang shrunk back timidly.**

**"Nie-zongzhu," Jiang Cheng stepped forward, "Meng-gongzi is injured. I wonder what mistake he has committed. I am afraid that if he is driven away like this-"**

**"Do not mention it again." Nie Mingjue interrupted again.**

"Thank you, Jiang-zongzhu," Jin Guangyao spoke up, "For your concern."

"If you hadn't disappeared, we would have asked you to come back to Lotus Pier with us," Jiang Cheng revealed, "My mother would have been angry..."

"Father and I would have accepted you," His sister said.

As they still would, if Jin Guangshan changed his mind. Sometimes, surviving meant doing unsavory acts. He couldn't say he'd always done the right thing from an objective moral standpoint. He abandoned his own brother because he didn't dare risk the political fallout. Surely that had to be worse than killing someone who, in his opinion, deserved it.

Anyone who insulted another man's mother placed their lives on the line. Anyone who dared beat a servant risked their retribution. If Wei Wuxian chose to kill someone rather than smile and laugh off the insults, Jiang Cheng would have supported him.

So he could stand with Jin Guangyao, help him against Madam Jin as he wished he could have helped his own brother against his mother.

**Wei Wuxian stared at him, then glanced at Nie Huaisang, who clutched his fan to restrain himself from speaking out again.**

**Nie Mingjue sighed, "Jiang-gongzi, Wei-gongzi, what is your next move?"**

**Wei Wuxian stepped forward to stand next to his brother, his voice softer when he spoke, "Now the situation in Cloud Recesses bodes ill rather than well, and Lan Zhan is**

**on his way back to Cloud Recesses. I am afraid that he may encounter danger, too.”**

Nie Huaisang had been too upset to notice the details of this event. Now, he couldn't help but bow his head in shame.

When they entered the Unclean Realm, Wei Wuxian stood shoulder to shoulder with Jiang Cheng. He spoke up, even when he should have stayed silent.

Right before he left, Wei Wuxian stood back. He left a respectful distance between servant and Sect Heir. He didn't speak until addressed by the Sect Leader.

Nie Huaisang failed to make him feel safe.

MianMian patted his shoulder comfortingly, “It's not your fault.”

No, it was his brother with his stupid temperament exasperated by his stupid saber and his stupid hatred of anything with the name Wen.

**“Wei Wuxian,” Jiang Cheng turned to him, “Nowadays, the Wen Sect sends people in charge of indoctrination. Wen Xu has gone to Cloud Recesses, and it is unknown who has gone to Lotus Pier.”**

**“Right,” Wei Wuxian acknowledged, “So let's go back to Lotus Pier quickly.”**

**“Yes,” Nie Mingjue agreed, “Now, the Wen Sect has sent out its thugs. You two need to go back to Lotus Pier as soon as possible. As for Xichen...” He sighed again, “The best thing I can wish for him is his safety.”**

People began to whisper again, comparing Meng Yao to Wei Wuxian.

They worried that if they continued to justify his less than righteous actions, that they would soon be justifying evil. But it wasn't the Yiling Patriarch that crossed the line. It was Lianfeng-Zun who killed another man to save himself. Yet, if he hadn't, and Chifeng-Zun's temper led to his execution for letting Xue Yang leave...

What would that mean for the outcome of the Sunshot Campaign.

Did morality really mean nothing if the immoral action in question benefitted them?

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your support and ideas! Remember this is the CQL verse, so character's motivations are a little different. Especially JGY's. Understanding isn't forgiveness...

Ah, if I keep fiddling with this chapter I'll never post it. It is what it is, and I hope you liked it!



# Fractured Families

## Chapter Summary

Sometimes your troubles are of your own making. Other times, someone brings trouble to your home.

## Chapter Notes

What even is the CQL timeline? Fair warning, I switched the order of a few scenes.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lan Xichen forced himself to calmly drink tea.

He pitied Wangji for continuing to love Wei Wuxian, oblivious to how similar their situations were. He still loved A-Yao. He saw him be ruthless and selfish, and he still loved him.

He was a fool. A self-deluded fool. He blamed A-Yao's circumstances for his darkness. He thought, with his support, he would be able to have a better life, and thus become a better man. He never thought his flaws were so deeply embedded in his personality.

"It's fine if you care for him," Wangji muttered.

He tilted his head, "Like you?"

"You know him differently," His brother said, "He cares for you."

"And possibly only for me," Lan Xichen whispered miserably.

"Which doesn't make it a lie," Wangji pointed out.

No, but was the man he loved a lie or just another side of him? Could he say he loved him if he didn't know all of him? Heavens, how did Wangji handle this? There were so many secrets Wei Wuxian kept from him, yet he trusted him, cared for him, supported him, against the majority of the cultivation world.

If he continued to support A-Yao, wasn't he a hypocrite? Or were the two of them just fools together? Sheltered young masters who knew nothing of the struggles of their cherished ones?

"How do you do it?" He wondered.



His younger brother blinked, “If I abandon him, who else will protect him?”

“What if he is not worth your protection?” He frowned.

Wangji mirrored his frown, “He does not deserve death.”

Could he stand by and watch A-Yao die?

He took in another deep breath, hoping he wouldn’t have to answer that question.

**When Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng returned to Yunmeng, they were greeted by nearly everyone they encountered as they walked down the pier. They only stopped in front of a lotus pod seller, Wei Wuxian inquiring, “How is business lately?”**

**“It’s good,” The merchant replied.**

**Wei Wuxian ducked down to grab a pod, “By the way, sir, has anything strange happened in Yunmeng recently?”**

**“There’s nothing strange,” The merchant reported, “Other than some unfamiliar faces. It is said some smaller sects around here want to go to Zongzhu for shelter.” The two cultivators exchanged alarmed looks, “I don’t know the details.” Jiang Cheng turned to leave, but the merchant stopped him, “Come here. I’ve got fresh lotus seed pods. Take a bag with you.”**

**“Thank you, sir,” Wei Wuxian smiled, “Remember to have some tea with me.”**

It was one thing to watch Wei Wuxian earn the respect of accomplished cultivators. It was another to see how easily he had the respect of all the people in Lotus Pier. Not just their respect, but their amiability.

Many Sect Leaders made a note to better their relations with the civilians in their towns. Wei Wuxian knew where to find information, and he seemed to think average people were better than those paid to be informants.

It seemed so simple, yet brilliant. Of course a street vendor would notice new people on the street. A street vendor would also speak to other street vendors. Even enemies needed to eat or drink. It was common courtesy to ask where someone was from and what business brought them somewhere.

If they refused to answer, or the answer was suspicious, why wouldn’t they tell the local hero?

**They finally reached Lotus Pier, going immediately to the training grounds. As soon as they saw them, the disciples stopped and crowded around them, “Gongzi is back!”**

**“I’ve missed you so much.”**

**“Did you bring something delicious for us?”**

The Jiang Sect stared at their Sect Leader.

It was strange to see their predecessors be so familiar with Wei Wuxian. When their head disciple was around, he was always...distant. His smiles were strained and they didn't reach his eyes. He didn't bring them back anything from his visits to the rest of the pier. All he ever brought back was alcohol, which he kept for himself.

They understood why he kept his distance. Sect Leader Jiang might have been ignoring the whispers, but Wei Wuxian knew if he taught them anything, others would assume he was teaching demonic cultivation. It wouldn't be good for their Sect.

Still, they were irrationally jealous of the dead.

The past Wei Wuxian would have been a great Head Disciple, and Jiang Wanyin seemed almost approachable.

**Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng went to kneel before the Lotus Throne. Jiang Cheng leaned closer, "Tell me since we went out without permission, will A-Die punish us?"**

**Wei Wuxian swayed, "I think chances are we will be punished by him."**

**"It's all your fault," Jiang Cheng snapped, "What were you running around for? I wouldn't go out to search for you otherwise."**

**"My mistake," Wei Wuxian grumbled, "Later, I will bear the punishment for you."**

**"Come on," Jiang Cheng complained, "I have been with you since I was a child, since when do I not get punished for having a brother like you? I don't know what sin I committed in another life."**

**Wei Wuxian put a hand on his shoulder, "Thank you very much. Don't be angry. In the afterlife, let's still be brothers, okay?"**

**"Shut up." He shrugged his hand off.**

How could anyone think Wei Wuxian would betray Jiang Wanyin?

Jin Zixuan watched his half-brother let A-Ling play with some of his hair. Honestly, he wasn't bothered by what he'd done to the disrespectful Captain in the Unclean Realm. He'd spent his life ignoring rumors of far worse indiscretions by his father, and his more recent years ignoring those of his cousin.

He fought in the Sunshot Campaign. He opposed the obvious evil, but the evil lurking within Koi Tower? The longer he watched this, the more aware he became that there was probably more truth to those rumors than he wanted to believe. He couldn't afford to be naive and blind to the function of his own Sect anymore.

A-Li made him want to be a better person, but he needed Guangyao to ever fully control Koi Tower. He made the opening move, now he had to wait for Guangyao to respond. It certainly looked like he wanted to be an uncle, but it was one thing to love a baby. It was another to

love...him. Not even his wife got through building a relationship with him without getting hurt.

And it was complicated. Guangyao was jealous of him. It was probably why he kept his distance.

He didn't help by siding with his mother for so long. He turned his gaze to his brother-in-law. How did he deal with this? How did he love Wei Wuxian while still envying him? How did he find the strength to ignore his mother and form such closeness to someone whose existence his mother took as an insult?

He sighed. The answer was the same as why he wasn't friends with any of his peers.

It was easier for children. Now, they were adults, and adults had to prove themselves.

**Jiang Fengmian entered the room, and they both straightened, "Jiang-shushu," Wei Wuxian said, "It's me who broke the rules and went out without permission. Jiang Cheng went out to find me." He saluted, "Please punish me, Jiang-zongzhu."**

**Jiang Cheng bowed his head, "A-Die, I am not filial for making you worried."**

**Jiang Fengmian sighed, then started pacing, "A-Cheng, A-Xian. Are you hurt? Did you encounter any dangers on the journey?"**

**They exchanged a look, "A-Die..."**

**"Jiang-shushu, it is our fault for making you concerned," Wei Wuxian said.**

**"A-Die, we were not going out for fun this time. Instead, we were with Lan Wangji-" Jiang Cheng was interrupted by Wei Wuxian grabbing his wrist.**

Lan Qiren closed his eyes and let out a deep breath. He thought Wei Wuxian foolish and careless. He couldn't have been more wrong.

Wei Wuxian believed the Yin Iron was the Lan Sect's secret. He didn't share it with Jiang Fengmian, even after Xichen shared it with Nie Mingjue. He was willing to be punished unfairly for going off in secret.

Perhaps he was still correct. Wei Wuxian was foolish and careless with himself. With Wangji...with anyone else, he was the opposite.

**"A-Xian, A-Cheng," Jiang Yanli hurried into the room, and they both rose to greet her.**

**"Did you miss me, Shijie?" Wei Wuxian beamed.**

**"A-Jie, ignore him," Jiang Cheng smiled as well, "A-Jie, how are you these days?"**

**"You must have been missing me," Wei Wuxian insisted, getting another eye roll from his brother, "You have lost weight because of it." He pouted, but the pout melted into a smile when she leaned in to tap him on the nose.**

**“Shame on you,” Jiang Cheng criticized.**

**“Enough,” Jiang Fengmian interrupted, “Stop chatting. Let’s eat first.”**

**“Sure,” Jiang Yanli agreed, and they moved outside to a table.**

**“Where is A-Niang?” Jiang Cheng asked as the other two started grabbing food.**

**“Your mother is a little tired,” Jiang Fengmian answered, “Let’s eat first.”**

**“Who says I am tired?” Madam Yu demanded, striding out of the hall with her two attendants. She didn’t look happy.**

**The children rose to greet her, Jiang Cheng smiling, “A-Niang.”**

Lan Wangji wasn’t fooled by the smile. He could see how strained Jiang Wanyin was as he addressed his mother, even if there was some happiness. Jiang Yanli’s smile also grew more strained. Wei Ying and Jiang Fengmian, both known for their amiability, both faltered as she approached.

It was obvious none of them wanted her to be there.

This happy reunion meal now had a tension that shouldn’t exist amongst family.

He watched, needing this glimpse into Wei Ying’s formative years. Lan Wangji knew how many of his own behaviors came from his parents. He clung to the rules after his mother’s death, hoping that if he obeyed, he could see her again. He kept himself at a distance from others, scared of feeling the same love, scared of being driven to the same end, as his father.

Wei Ying didn’t remember his birth parents. He wasn’t unrestrained because he grew up with rogue cultivators as his role models. He was who he was, in part, because of Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian.

It was either them, his time on the streets, or Jiang Yanli.

**Madam Yu straightened his robes with a small smile of her own.**

**“Since you’re here, sit down and eat with us,” Jiang Fengmian said, “The children are hungry. I told them to eat first. All of you, sit down.”**

**“It is not the right time to be hungry,” Madam Yu replied, “After a few days, when they are in Qishan whether they can eat or not remains unknown. They better go hungry for awhile now to get used to it.”**

**Jiang Fengmian looked away, “No matter what will happen in the future, it is necessary to eat every day.” He started eating, ignoring his wife’s glare.**

**They all sat down again, the siblings exchanging meaningful looks as they did so.**

That was the Violet Spider.

No one was surprised by her severity, but they whispered about her anyways. She was the type of woman to go on night hunts, even after marriage. She didn't hold back against anyone, not even with her husband and children. Especially not in the presence of Wei Wuxian, who could have been Jiang Fengmian's bastard.

A few were curious if there was any truth in that.

Madam Yu's scorn fueled the rumors before. Now they could see Jiang Fengmian's response. If Wei Wuxian was his son...then Jiang Wanyin needed to be careful.

**"A-Niang," Jiang Cheng tentatively broke the silence, "Are we really going to accept indoctrination in person?"**

**"Ask your father," She stated shortly.**

**Jiang Fengmian set down his cup, "Here is the thing. Presumably, you have heard about it in Qinghe. The QishanWen have also sent a special envoy to Yunmeng, urging all the Sects to send their young family members to Qishan for several days. They will offer indoctrination in person."**

**"A-Cheng, A-Xian, I was going to explain it to you," The Sect Leader continued, "You two should prepare for it and set off."**

**"They will offer indoctrination in person?" Jiang Cheng repeated, "Is that what the Wen Sect said? Such shame on them."**

**"Mind your language and enjoy your meal," Jiang Fengmian scolded.**

Though, for all they muttered about the Violet Spider's temperament, it was much better for Sect Leader Jiang to have taken after her.

One thing everyone in the room realized while watching these memories was how young their heroes were when they were thrown into war. Their skills were undeniable, but so was their youthful playfulness. They were very powerful teenagers, but teenagers nonetheless.

It shouldn't have been up to them to handle the Yin Iron and take down the Wen Sect.

Yet it was them who stepped up while their parents had been content to ignore the Wen Sect's ambition for the sake of peace.

**Jiang Cheng went back to eating. Jiang Yanli handed Wei Wuxian a plate of lotus seeds. He smiled, "Thank you, Shijie."**

**"How can you be so calm?" Madam Yu demanded, narrowing her eyes at her husband.**

**"Why are you so anxious?" Jiang Fengmian replied.**

**She hit the table, "Anxious? How can you be so calm and unconcerned? The letter said that if we ever dare to disobey their order and refuse to give them our Sect heirs we will**

**be accused of treason against the gentry and harm to all the sects. Then we will be wiped out."**

**Madam Yu laughed, "How arrogant! What do they mean by 'sect heirs'? So either A-Cheng or A-Li has to be at their mercy. Why should we send them away?**

**Indoctrination? Since when is it the Wen Sect's turn to step in when we indoctrinate our own children? It is obvious that we're sending our own children to be hostages."**

**"A-Niang, do not be angry," Jiang Cheng interjected, "I'll go, that's it."**

**"Of course you're going," Madame Yu nearly shouted, "How could it be your sister?"**

Her husband squeezed her hand, but Jiang Yanli had long grown used to her mother's harsh words.

Seeing her again...she wished she could relive better memories. Not that there were many good memories whenever A-Xian was around. It wasn't her brother's fault, but the failing of her parents. Her mother could never get over her jealousy for a dead woman, and her father never set aside the guilt he felt for his dead friends.

She wished she could say she had the same ache in her heart seeing her mother's image as she had her father's, but it wouldn't be true.

"You are an amazing mother," Her husband whispered.

She would be better than both of her parents. Her little Jin Ling would grow up confident and loved.

**Jiang Yanli continued to nervously peel lotus seeds. Madam Yu narrowed her eyes at her husband, "Look at her, peeling the lotus seeds with pleasure. Stop it, A-Li." The young woman paused, "Who are you peeling the lotus seeds for?" She set the plate down, "You are the master, not a servant or someone else."**

**"San-niang," Jiang Fengmian spoke up.**

**"What?" She narrowed her eyes, "Did I say anything wrong?" She looked at Wei Wuxian, "Servant. Are you not willing to hear that?"**

**Wei Wuxian averted his gaze.**

Jin Guangyao wasn't happy to have his suspicions confirmed.

Jin Ling made an unhappy noise in his arms, and he quickly soothed him. A child was often the reflection of their parents. He wondered what his nephew would inherit. Would he have the best parts of them? The worst? Some strange combination? Would he choose a favorite uncle and take after them?

He himself took the best of his mother and the worst of his father.

He wasn't a good person. He didn't even believe good people existed, with the possible exception of Er-ge...

Around the room, people whispered if this was why Wei Wuxian ultimately left the Jiang Sect. He fought to keep his comments to himself. After the revelation of the true reason he left the Nie Sect, it was better for him to keep his head down. They would soon forget about the murder anyways, as they always did. Their righteousness always fizzled out when it gained them nothing.

Still, he found himself biting his tongue. They thought one thing or one person drove someone to evil? How foolish.

It wasn't one person, or one action, that pushed someone over the edge. It wasn't anything the Captain said or did in that moment that made him ultimately decide to kill him. There was no final shove off the cliff.

No, it was a million little things. It was as though the cliff had eroded beneath him, and he didn't realize he was that close to falling until he was.

**“Jiang Fengmian, I ask you are you going to send him this time?” Madam Yu pointed at Wei Wuxian, and his eyes widened slightly as he continued to eat lotus seeds.**

**“It's up to him,” Jiang Fengmian said, “He can go if he wants to.”**

**“I'll go,” Wei Wuxian volunteered immediately.**

“He can go if he wants to?” Nie Huaisang repeated incredulously.

Honestly, the revelations about Meng Yao didn't really surprise him when he thought about it. Maybe it was because there were too many similarities between them. Nie Huaisang had never been given a reason to be vindictive or vicious, but he knew he was capable of both if some unfortunate soul ever pushed him to it.

But this shook him.

“I thought Jiang Fengmian cared about him,” He continued, his hand shaking, “I mean, Wei-xiong said he didn't favor him but I didn't realize it was like this.” MianMian placed a hand on his shoulder, and he laughed, “Maybe he would have been better off in the Nie Sect.”

“What do you mean, Nie-xiong?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“It might look like favor, letting him do what he wants, but if your father cared about him, he would restrict him for his own safety.” Like Da-ge did. There was something to be said about letting children learn from their mistakes, but this... “Wei-xiong could have died. Your father should never have let him go, and to make it his choice...” He was too angry for words.

“It certainly explains his attitude at Indoctrination,” MianMian continued for him, “He was the only one who chose to be there, so all that pain was his choice. How could he complain?”

Nie Huaisang closed his eyes. He wondered if San-ge realized the biggest difference between him and Wei Wuxian yet.

Meng Yao was raised by his mother. Yes, he wasn't raised in a big Sect and growing up in a pleasure house would have its own consequences, but he had a mother who loved him. A mother who taught him he deserved better, to take it through whatever means necessary. His entire life was about his own survival, which made him selfish.

Wei Wuxian didn't have parents. He didn't even have adoptive parents. He had masters. He had Madam Yu, who taught him that he was only a servant, who made him believe he was lucky to have what he did and he really deserved worse. He became the sort of person who put everyone else before him, who would always sacrifice himself.

Neither was ideal.

Of course, most of the room wouldn't agree. They would gladly take Wei Wuxian's sacrifice if it meant their comfort.

It only made him angrier.

**Madam Yu scoffed, "How nice! He can go if he wants to. He can stay if he doesn't. Why doesn't A-Cheng have a choice?" Jiang Cheng looked down, while Wei Wuxian awkwardly fiddled with his hair, "Is this how you raise someone else's son? Jiang-zongzhu you are such a kind person."**

**"San-niang," Jiang Fengmian said again, "I believe you are tired and it is time you rest."**

**"A-Niang-"**

**"Don't you ever call me!" Madam Yu snapped, "You want to tell me to shut up like your father? You idiot! I tell you, in your entire life, you are nothing compared to that guy sitting beside you, no matter your cultivation or night hunts. Yet you're the first one to seek out your own doom." She hit the table again.**

**She sighed, "But it's not your fault. Your mother is no match for his mother. It is what it is, but I just can't take it when it comes to you. How many times have I told you? Do not mess with him. How could you say a good word for him? How can I have a son like you?" She rose and left.**

**"Fine," Jiang Fengmian decided, "Let's eat."**

**None of them seemed happy anymore.**

Jiang Cheng tried to look at it like Nie Huaisang. His mother was wrong. He didn't have a choice because he was the Sect Heir, and they couldn't send A-Jie. Wei Wuxian had a choice because they could call Wen Chao's bluff. What importance did the son of a servant have to Wen Ruohan? Surely he wouldn't kick up a fuss about such an unimportant person.

It was never about their mothers. It was about their fathers.



He idiotically believed his mother. Wei Wuxian was allowed to make the choice, therefore his father cared more for him. He didn't realize it was the exact opposite. By allowing Wei Wuxian to go, his father showed that he didn't care enough to protect him even when he could have.

Of course Wei Wuxian would choose to go. He would never let Jiang Cheng walk into danger alone. Hadn't they raised him to be his subordinate? To be by his side always?

And it nearly did kill him.

"He deserved better," Hanguang-Jun commented.

They all did, but at least they had each other.

Used to. Used to have each other.

**Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng approached Jiang Fengmian that night.**

**"It's you two," The former Sect Leader set down his work, "What is it? It's so late."**

**"Jiang-shushu," Wei Wuxian spoke, "The reason the Wen Sect is so rampant now might have something to do with us. It is a long story. I am afraid that it started from the day when we took lectures from the Lan Sect. On the way back from Qinghe, I kept sending messages to Lan Zhan, but I never got his response."**

**"Nowadays, the Wen Sect has become increasingly rampant," Wei Wuxian continued, "And has revealed their malicious intent. They tend to do bad things without fear. They steal things forcefully. I am worried that Cloud Recesses..."**

Wei Wuxian really deserved better.

Nie Mingjue tried to find a way to calm his brother, but had no experience with this. It was always the opposite, where Huaisang attempted to calm his temper. And this was another problem he had inadvertently contributed to.

How many times had he refused to allow Huaisang to visit his friends in Lotus Pier? He picked up on his desperation, but thought he truly didn't want to practice with his saber. He never thought his weak little brother wanted to go to Yunmeng for more than relaxation. How relaxing could it be in that company, with Madam Yu's bitter comments and Jiang Fengmian's silence?

Huaisang wanted to protect his friends, even if the manner of protection wasn't one he understood.

Nie Mingjue was glad it was finally in the afternoon and he could switch his tea out for wine. If Huaisang told him Wei Wuxian was being abused...he didn't know what he would have done. Subtlety wasn't his forte, but Huaisang probably had a plan. He would have stolen his friend away somehow without creating a political nightmare.

Then what? Wei Wuxian was a genius who took inspiration from everything. Would he have looked at the Nie Sect's sabers and still managed to create demonic cultivation? Would he have turned against them like Meng Yao did over time?

Could he come up with a solution to their Sect's burden?

**“Actually, I have long been aware of what you just said,” Jiang Fengmian replied.**

**“You have known it for a long time?” Jiang Cheng wondered.**

**“Was it when we were taking lectures?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**Jiang Fengmian nodded, “Lan-zongzhu was rightfully worried about it. We just did not expect that the Wen Sect would do evil so brazenly.” He rose and pulled out a letter, “When you were in Qinghe, Lan-zongzhu sent another letter.” Wei Wuxian bowed and accepted, “It said that the Lan Sect had become a thorn in the Wen Sect's side for the Yin Iron.**

**“Wen Xu has gone to Gusu,” He solemnly informed the two young men, “It may not simply be just to give order and indoctrination.”**

No, it was to attack.

But even the hint of what was to come soon didn't distract the viewers from what they'd just seen.

Madam Jin grimaced as people continued to talk about Ziyuan. She bit back her defense. Her last attack on the bastard didn't get her anywhere. Her son seemed stubbornly set on having a brother, inspired by the brotherhood shown between the siblings in other Sects. Her husband was as useless as always.

Besides, she could admit that Wei Wuxian didn't deserve this. Not like Jin Guangyao did.

**“What about us?” Jiang Cheng demanded as Wei Wuxian stared blankly ahead, “Will the Wen Sect attack us?”**

**Jiang Fengmian turned away, “Although the Wen Sect is strong now, Lan-zongzhu said that refining the Yin Iron is extremely complicated. The Yin Iron will control people when refined carelessly. Therefore, before Wen Ruohan gets stronger, they will not send people to siege and suppress various factions in case of a counterattack.”**

**“The Lan Sect is deeply involved with the Yin Iron,” He finished, “They cannot keep a low profile any longer.” He turned back, “A-Cheng, A-Xian.” They stepped closer, “Delay always brings danger. You set off together in three days.”**

**“But...” Jiang Cheng trailed off.**

**“I know I am making it hard for you,” Jiang Fengmian looked between the two.**

**“Jiang-shushu, I understand,” Wei Wuxian said, “The situation is bigger than the people now. When we arrive in Qishan, we will definitely take care of ourselves. As for Wen Chao... at most, he’ll give us two punches when he’s pissed off, but he won’t dare to kill us.”**

**Jiang Fengmian smiled, “To attempt the impossible. Do nothing until you achieve something.”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded.**

Jin Zixuan couldn’t help but snort, “We underestimated him.”

They all underestimated the danger of Indoctrination, but it made him feel a little better. Wei Wuxian didn’t think it would be deadly. Maybe they didn’t give him any warning because of that. The only ones in danger were those involved with the Yin Iron so far. Keeping him out of it kept him safer, even if it showed how little he was trusted amongst his peers.

“We didn’t have it the worst,” Hanguang-Jun pointed out.

“True,” Nie Huaisang agreed, “Did Wei-xiong ever tell you what happened when he was thrown in the dungeon?”

“No,” Jiang Wanyin frowned.

“He was thrown in the dungeon?” Zewu-Jun worried.

The four of them exchanged glances. MianMian cleared her throat, “Wei Wuxian was very intent on protecting Hanguang-Jun. Naturally, he incurred Wen Chao’s fury.”

They left it like that for now. Really, the only one who could say how bad it got was Wei Wuxian.

**Lan Wangji made his way up the path to Cloud Recesses. He stopped, hearing a noise beneath his feet, before jumping into the air and out of a trap. While in midair, he dodged the chains launched by the enemy, and flipped back to land on firm ground. Wen Zhuliu kicked him as soon as he did, forcing him further back.**

**“Wen Zhuliu,” Lan Wangji said as the rest of the Wen group emerged.**

**Wen Chao laughed, “Lan Zhan, you are always so arrogant, yet you still end up in my hands.”**

**Lan Wangji didn’t respond, choosing to stare at Wen Zhuliu.**

**“What about this?” Wen Chao continued, “You kneel down and hand in the Yin Iron shard, and I will not kill you.”**

**Again, Lan Wangji did not speak.**

**“You know what?” Wen Chao looked at his sword, “What’s most disgusting is your patronizing tone.”**

“He didn’t say anything,” Lan Xichen complained.

He hated seeing this. He hated watching Wei Wuxian be mistreated by those who should have cared for him. He always held Jiang Fengmian in such high respect, but now...how could any responsible adult allow those under their protection to throw themselves into danger? If there had been any way to keep Wangji safe, he would have taken it.

He never would have guessed that someone with such a bright smile was so...he hated to say unloved, as he did have his siblings, but so surrounded by resentment.

Then again, A-Yao smiled despite all the resentment around him.

He smiled to hide his pain. He smiled to keep up his facade. He smiled because if he didn’t, others would think he was ungrateful. He smiled to fool the few who did care about him, so they’d never see he was breaking until he already shattered.

**“Who the hell do you think you are? You are merely a tiny ant on the foot of Qishan Mountain.” Lan Wangji didn’t flinch, so Wen Chao ordered, “Wen Zhuliu, beat him!”**

**Lan Wangji pulled out a talisman, and it activated into a swarm of butterflies, distracting the Wens. He used that to cover his escape.**

Even in Lotus Pier, Wei Wuxian protected him.

Perhaps Hanguang-Jun’s feelings were returned back then.

Not that the Yiling Patriarch could possibly still care for him. He was too full of resentment to feel love. Surely.

**Meanwhile, Lan Xichen sat with Lan Qiren. They both sensed the moment their wards failed and their disciples ran to go confront the enemy.**

**“Come here!” Lan Xichen’s eyes opened at Wen Xu’s voice, “Besiege Cloud Recesses! Don’t let even a fly sneak out!”**

**“Clean the house!” The Wen Sect chanted.**

**“Zongzhu,” Su She came in and knelt, “Wen Xu has surrounded every entrance of the mountain with his people. He says he will set fire and burn the mountain to the ground.”**

**Lan Qiren swayed forward and spat blood.**

**Lan Xichen got up, “Shufu.” He moved to assist him.**

**“The Qishan Wens are surely vicious and sinister,” Lan Qiren coughed again.**

**“Shufu,” Lan Xichen repeated, “There is fire poison in Wen Xu’s Red Fire Talisman. Do not be angry.”**

**“Where is Wangji?” Lan Qiren demanded, “Have you contacted him?” Lan Xichen shook his head, so the elder grasped his hand, “You have to contact him. Tell him to leave as soon as possible. Tell him to never come back. If he hides outside, there’s a chance we can keep...” He coughed harsher this time.**

As though he would have stayed away.

Lan Wangji did not say that out loud. Fleeing Cloud Recesses was a necessary action, but his brother still regretted it. His brother felt responsible for a great many things that were beyond his control, and there was no point in him bringing it up when they were already reliving it.

At least his uncle planned to keep him out of danger.

Unlike Jiang Fengmian...

There was no point to being angry at a dead man, but his heart ached for Wei Ying. He knew Madam Yu was cruel to him. He hadn’t known that Jiang Fengmian was unintentionally cruel. He thought Jiang Fengmian would treat him more like family, but it looked like the only one who loved him in that respect was Jiang Yanli.

How much did it hurt Wei Ying to miss her wedding? Was his exile that much more torturous now that he knew he was missing the celebration of her son?

**“Shufu,” Lan Xichen supported him.**

**“Zongzhu,” Another disciple fell to his knees as he ran into the room, “Something bad has happened-”**

**“The Lan Sect face danger fearlessly,” Lan Xichen interrupted, “Do you still remember what I have taught you before?”**

**“Zewu-Jun, the Wen Sect has gone around the mountain and broke the wards,” The Lan disciple reported, “They set fire everywhere. The fire is nearly expanding to the houses where the inner disciples live.”**

Lan Xichen stepped away, **“Shufu. Now the situation is clear. The Lan Sect may face a devastating disaster. With all due respect, I beg you to take the ancient books in the Library Pavilion and leave Cloud Recesses.”** He bowed.

**“Zongzhu!”** Su She saluted.

**“If I leave,” Lan Qiren spoke slowly, “What about you? What about the rest of you?”**

**“We will retreat to the Cold Pond Cave,” Lan Xichen answered, “Without the ribbon, they cannot get in.” Lan Qiren shook his head, so Lan Xichen fell to his knees, “It is urgent. Please look at the situation. No matter what, we have to save the foundation of the Lan Sect.”**

**“Xichen,” Lan Qiren replied, “Please do not say another word. You go and I’ll stay.”**

**“Shufu-” Lan Xichen began to shuffle closer.**

**Lan Qiren held up a hand, “If you still consider me your uncle, go now.”**

**“Shufu,” Lan Xichen looked close to tears, his voice dropping, “I am the master of the Lan Sect. I swear I will never leave Cloud Recesses.”**

**Lan Qiren turned to face him, rising to his knees. He grasped his nephew’s arms, “It is because you are the master that you should be the one to leave. Only if the ancient books aren’t destroyed and the master doesn’t die will the GusuLan survive.” He let go and sat back, nodding with a small smile.**

**“Shufu,” Lan Xichen whispered, closing his eyes and lowering himself to the floor.**

Many averted their gazes from the scene.

None of them should see Zewu-Jun brought low.

Jin Guangyao slowly moved from his seat. This explained so much about how he found him. He silently gave Jin Ling back to Jin Zixuan before moving around to kneel next to his sworn brother. He wasn’t sure if his opinion of him had changed, if he still cared for him...but he pulled him out of this once. He could do so again.

“Sometimes there are no good choices,” He whispered, feeling Da-ge’s glare on his head but uncaring of his suspicions, “You shouldn’t feel guilty for surviving.”

“Is that how you do it?” Er-ge whispered back, but his words only held a slight hint of an accusation.

“I only regret that my actions brought you pain,” He admitted gently.

Er-ge looked at him, “Not the lies?”

“I have never-”

“A lie by omission is still a lie,” Hanguang-Jun interrupted.

Jin Guangyao pressed his lips together, then bowed his head. There was no way to evade with words when Hanguang-Jun was there to cut through them with his bluntness.

“Did you think I would stop caring for you if you told me the truth?” Er-ge asked.

How very Lan of him to focus on the present rather than his issues with the past.

His grip tightened on his thighs, “I...I cannot depend on your kindness, Zewu-Jun, as much as I would like to. My mother...”

His mother died waiting on the kindness of a powerful man to save her. As much as he dreamed that this young and handsome Sect Leader could solve all his problems...this wasn't a fantasy. This was reality, where people were all too often disappointing. Er-ge couldn't get him what he wanted. Avoiding hurting him was the most he could do. Anything more...anything better...

A warm hand tilted his chin back up, forcing eye contact, "A-Yao..."

So he was still A-Yao. He relaxed slightly, "Er-ge."

"Sit with me," He requested.

Jin Guangyao hesitated, "My father..."

"I will protect you from your father," The Lan Sect Leader promised.

Oh, if only he could.

No, if only Jin Guangyao would let him.

**Lan Qiren rose, "Pass my orders! All the inner disciples bring the outside disciples to the Cold Pond Cave."**

**When Lan Wangji arrived at Cloud Recesses, it was to the sight of Lan Qiren protecting the Lan disciples from Wen Xu. He immediately took to the air, summoning his guqin to force the enemy back. He landed between the two with barely a glance back. Wen Xu yelled and charged again, but Lan Wangji forced him back again.**

**"Kill them!" Wen Xu shouted as his disciples finally caught up.**

**Lan Wangji took to the air again, and with a massive effort, destroyed the ground between the opposing Sects. With the dust in the air, he turned to the elder, "Shufu, go."**

It was an amazing display of power. They hadn't seen Hanguang-Jun use musical cultivation in combat until then.

Nie Mingjue continued to glare at his youngest sworn brother. Just when he thought Xichen might be able to see him clearly, Jin Guangyao had to muddy the waters with more of his words. He prayed seeing what he'd done under Wen Ruohan would finally convince him there was no good in the smaller man.

"Stop it, Da-ge," Huaisang muttered, "We can't both be upset."

"I'm not-" He started, but cut himself off when Lady Luo scoffed.

"Matters of the heart are best settled without interference," She offered, "I'm sure if Zewu-Jun could have dissuaded Hanguang-Jun's affections, he would have."

Why were the Lan so unlucky in love? No wonder Lan Qiren considered them cursed.

“And you would have helped Jin Zixuan if he weren’t such a disaster,” Huaisang finally smiled.

Lady Luo laughed, then turned her smile towards him, “Some things you have to realize on your own.”

Nie Mingjue found himself oddly comforted by her words. This was a woman who publicly renounced her Sect, who dropped out of the cultivation world entirely to do what she believed was right. She was able to see through her affection for her peers and leave. It was too late to help Wei Wuxian, but better late than never.

Xichen would see through it and Nie Mingjue would be there for him when he did.

**They ran up the path to the back hills. They made it to the hidden entrance, a few disciples remaining behind to fight back the Wen Sect.**

**Lan Qiren sat where Lan Yi had, Lan Wangji off to one side with the Yin Iron in his hand. There was utter silence, then they heard Wen Xu’s voice, “Lan Wangji come out! Hand over the Yin Iron or I will kill all the disciples in Cloud Recesses.”**

**They could hear the dying cries of the disciples as they were killed.**

**Lan Wangji looked to his uncle, but glanced away as soon as he met his gaze.**

**“I will ask again,” Wen Xu spoke, “How do we get in? Answer!”**

**“The headband!” Someone answered.**

**“Su She, you are a coward!” Another voice shouted, “How can a traitor like you be in the Lan Sect?” That voice was then silenced.**

**“Where is Lan Xichen?” Wen Xu demanded.**

**“He has escaped with the ancient books,” Su She answered.**

There was an immediate uproar in the room.

This was why Su Minshan was cast out of the Lan Sect? They heard whispers that he was a traitor, but the Lan Sect surely kept to their rules too well for no clear rumor reached them. They didn’t realize he sold them out. Most disciples were willing to die for their Sect Leaders. It was more than what they deserved for taking them in and training them.

It was a privilege to train in the Lan Sect.

And Su Minshan betrayed that. He put Zewu-Jun’s life at risk by revealing his escape.

“Ungrateful coward.”

How dare he found his own Sect using what the Lan Sect taught him when he betrayed them?



**Lan Wangji looked down at the Yin Iron in his hand, his fist trembling in rage. He moved towards the exit.**

**“Wangji,” Lan Qiren warned.**

**“Shufu,” Lan Wangji replied, “It is here that Master Lan Yi told me to keep our conscience clear.” He spread his arms and flew over the water. He emerged from the cave just in time to save Su She’s life.**

**“When did I ever agree to die for them?” Su She bit out in his own defense.**

**“Hanguang-Jun saved your life!” Sect Leader Yao shouted.**

**“I only lived long enough to be saved because I spoke out,” He snarled, “We wouldn’t have been in danger at all if Hanguang-Jun had hidden the Yin Iron better.”**

**Su She fought the urge to seek Jin Guangyao’s assistance. His friend was in no position to help him, with his own reputation at risk. He met the gaze of his fellow Sect Leaders, unashamed of his own survival.**

**What made Zewu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun so much better than him? What? Just because they were born special he should gladly lay down his life for them? What nonsense! If he had access to the hidden texts, if he’d been trained since early childhood in cultivation, he could have been just as powerful as them.**

**“Ha!” Sect Leader Jiang narrowed his eyes, “Why not go further back and curse the Lan ancestor that took the Yin Iron from Xue Chonghai?”**

**"Take responsibility for your own actions!" Sect Leader Ouyang slapped his table.**

**“Enough,” Lan Qiren interrupted, “This matter has been settled.”**

**Of course the others listened to him. Su She sneered, hating the bitter sting of humiliation. They would remember this when they were the ones cast low.**

**“Lan Wangji,” Wen Xu faced him, “You finally came out.”**

**“Let them go,” Lan Wangji demanded, “Leave Cloud Recesses.”**

**Two Wen disciples drew their blades and held them to Lan Wangji’s neck, “Where is the Yin Iron?” Wen Xu asked.**

**“Leave Cloud Recesses,” Lan Wangji repeated, “I will go to Qishan.”**

**Wen Xu chuckled, “Okay.” He glanced back at Su She, “Set him free.” He almost left, but turned back, “By the way, aren’t you very powerful? Hey, break one of his legs.”**

**The Wen disciple on his left did so, and the Yin Iron fell out of its bag. Wen Xu laughed, and Lan Wangji just watched him.**

Jin Guangshan sighed. There went the last doubts that Wei Wuxian took the Yin Iron from Lan Wangji, and his own bastard ensured Xue Yang disappeared with the other.

So A-Li's theory held merit. Somehow, somehow, Wei Wuxian acquired another piece of the Yin Iron. One not even Wen Ruohan knew of.

He glanced at his son, whose face was lined with tension. How was his heir this weak? Already he could feel the sympathy swell for the other Major Sects. Seeing the attacks they suffered was different than hearing about them later. It would soon become obvious just how little the Jin Sect actually did, beyond Guangyao's contribution.

At least his bastard managed to keep his reputation afloat.

He hated to think he might need him once they saw the Jiang Sect be destroyed.

**Back at Lotus Pier, Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian watched their disciples shoot kites. Wei Wuxian was obviously distracted, and Jiang Cheng kept glancing at him worriedly. The younger eventually pulled up his bow and fired his own shot as the disciples cheered him on.**

**Jiang Cheng missed. He sighed, "It has gone so far. Can you shoot it?"**

**"Guess," Wei Wuxian smirked.**

**The disciples cheered again as Wei Wuxian lifted his bow and took the shot. He made it. The disciples got louder, and Jiang Cheng couldn't help but smile.**

**"Wei-gongzi is the best!" One shouted up, "Even if you are in Qishan, the Wen Sect has nothing on you."**

**"Teach them a lesson," Another shouted up, "Let them know the Jiang Sect is not weak."**

**The two brothers looked up, "Shooting under their sun won't be as easy as today," Jiang Cheng commented.**

**"It is nothing but attempting the impossible," Wei Wuxian assured him.**

**Jiang Cheng smiled again.**

Lan Wangji fought back a swell of hope. Wei Ying had thought about him. Wei Ying had worried for him. Enough that Jiang Wanyin noticed, as did the other disciples of the Jiang Sect.

It didn't have to mean anything. Wei Ying was a good person. It was natural for him to worry for anyone who might be in danger.

**"So he was always skilled with a bow," Jin Guangyao commented.**

Lan Wangji turned to look at him, furrowing his eyebrows in a silent question.

“The best in Yunmeng,” Jiang Wanyin replied, “He liked to hunt pheasants.”

“Ah,” The smaller man smiled, “There were some who believed his performance at the crowd hunt was due to his...newfound cultivation. I’m glad that it isn’t.”

If this was his way of trying to make amends, or further ingratiate himself with his brother...

Lan Wangji wasn’t sure what he would do. Even when his brother thought the worst of Wei Ying, he didn’t take action against him. What right did he have to do the opposite, when he had no concrete evidence against Jin Guangyao?

**It cut away to Wen Qing standing to the side in front of Wen Ruohan. The mad Sect Leader kicked one of his own disciples back. She faced him, “Your Excellency.”**

**The downed disciple begged for his life.**

**Wen Ruohan lifted a hand towards her, listening to the begging before activating the Yin Iron and using it to awaken the puppets in the room. Wen Qing watched in terror as they shuffled slowly towards the disciple, whose begging grew more desperate.**

**“Kill,” Wen Ruohan ordered, sitting on his throne to watch.**

**Wen Qing watched as the man was pulled back, and the puppets descended on him, tearing him apart. She forced herself to look away as Wen Ruohan laughed.**

No one should have been surprised at this point to have Wen Qing’s innocence confirmed.

Wen Ruohan was truly a monster. He wasn’t satisfied with abducting cultivators for his experiments. He also used his own people. He killed them for his own amusement, and to terrify his subjects into submission.

**“What do you think of my puppets?” Wen Ruohan asked her. Wen Qing couldn’t muster words, and he continued, “Are you scared? It is said that you let go of Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian.”**

**This prompted her to step forward and kneel before him, “I failed to do my mission.”**

**“This is my last warning to you,” Wen Ruohan replied as the puppets slowly surrounded her, “If that happens again, Wen Ning will be the one to come here.”**

**“It will not happen again,” Wen Qing promised, “His Excellency brought me up and I am grateful. As long as His Excellency has an order, I dare not disobey.”**

**“As long as you understand, I am testing the Yin Iron,” Wen Ruohan said, “Come and help me.”**

**“Yes,” Wen Qing answered simply.**

**With a gesture, Wen Ruohan stopped the puppets advance.**

“And yet...” Nie Huaisang trailed off.

“She still helped us,” Jiang Cheng finished.

Even with her brother’s life on the line, she came to see him at Indoctrination. Well, Wei Wuxian, but the point still stood. He was relieved she wasn’t punished for her help with the fairy statue, but his admiration for her grew with the knowledge she was forbidden from doing exactly what she did.

It didn’t matter if she returned his feelings. When this was over he would take her and her people out of the Burial Mounds and lavish them with every comfort the Jiang Sect could afford.

Knowing her, she would simply want to be able to continue her work as a doctor.

Which was fine with him. If it meant having her and Wei Wuxian safe, he would gladly let the Jiang Sect become known for its healing techniques and talismans.

**It went back to Lotus Pier, with Jiang Yanli fussing over her brothers. Jiang Fengmian watched from behind.**

**“Shijie, that’s enough,” Wei Wuxian stopped here, “It’ll take more than two years for us to eat them all.”**

**“A-Li, enough,” Jiang Fengmian spoke up, “The children from the YunmengJiang are not so delicate that they cannot face the storm outside.”**

**Jiang Yanli worriedly stood to the side.**

**“Jiang-shushu, do you have something to give us?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**“What should be given has been given,” Jiang Fengmian answered, “Hold your sword beside you and keep your creed in your heart.”**

Again, a few wondered if part of the reason Wei Wuxian no longer wielded his sword was grief.

Even if Jiang Fengmian didn't treat him like his son, he still cared for him. Wei Wuxian certainly looked up to him.

It was hard to imagine him succumbing to grief, but Wei Wuxian became the Yiling Patriarch somehow.

**“Attempt the impossible, right?” Wei Wuxian smiled.**

**Jiang Fengmian and Jiang Yanli echoed his smile.**

**“That doesn’t mean making mischief when you know the result,” Jiang Cheng teased.**

**Wei Wuxian nudged him.**

**“Mark my words,” Jiang Fengmian said, “Do nothing until you achieve something.”  
The two young men nodded, “Well, it is late. Set off, please.”**

**They both bowed and stepped onto the boat. Wei Wuxian waved goodbye.**

Notably, Madam Yu did not come to send her son off.

Few cared for that, pondering Jiang Fengmian’s final advice. Do nothing until you achieve something. Don’t take risks unless they know it is worth it.

Such naive words to young men being sent to be hostages.

War itself was a risk. The Sunshot Campaign was born from desperation, not from any belief of certain victory. And from what they’d heard about the Indoctrination...

Sometimes, one needed to risk their life to have a chance to survive.

## Chapter End Notes

Big response to the last chapter. Thank you all for your comments! Honestly, I haven't decided what I'm going to do with JGY. I thought this was heading towards redemption but now...it's all up in the air.

On a different note, how do y'all think NHS got home from Indoctrination? He didn't escape with everyone else, and fanon leans in two directions:

- 1) The Wen Sect just let him go.
- 2) He just walked out and literally no one cared.

If you have an opinion, please let me know!

# I Always Knew We'd End Up In Prison

## Chapter Summary

I just thought we'd actually do something illegal.

## Chapter Notes

Why does Wen Chao talk so much?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“How bad was Indoctrination?” Nie Mingjue asked.

He had never asked before.

He never forgot that he'd given his little brother up to be a hostage. He was just thankful he was gone when the Wen Sect attacked again. Huaisang wasn't there to see the Unclean Realm become a Supervisory Office, however temporarily. By the time that handful of disciples that survived returned with his brother, he didn't have time for questions.

He heard stories later. Their swords were taken away. They were made to be live bait in a nighthunt. They were trapped in a cave with the Xuanwu of Slaughter, where Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji sacrificed themselves so the rest could escape.

He was too busy organizing the reclamation of his home, and preparing for the Sunshot Campaign, to ask his brother what it was like for him.

“Ah...that depends on who you ask,” Huaisang evaded, “Wen Chao was an idiot, but any idiot knew our weaknesses.”

“Weaknesses?” Xichen echoed.

“We cared,” His little brother shrugged, “About each other, about our families, our people.”

“Caring isn't a weakness,” Xichen frowned.

“Isn't it?” Jiang Wanyin wondered, “If we'd just looked out for ourselves-”

“None of us would have survived,” Jin Zixuan interrupted.

Jiang Wanyin's expression darkened, but whatever vitriol he thought, he kept to himself. Nie Mingjue was almost tempted to demand he speak his mind. If he had a problem with Xichen, they should settle it now. Openly. Where he could know what was going on.

Huaisang sighed, "I wish Wei-xiong didn't get hurt too, Jiang-xiong."

His annoyance faded immediately. From what he'd seen, Wei Wuxian put himself in danger. He chose to go after the Dire Owl, leaving Jiang Wanyin to protect Huaisang and Wen Qing. He also chose to go help him against the Wen, pointing Jiang Wanyin towards Xue Yang. He gladly faced anything as long as no one else needed to.

He couldn't be mad at Jiang Wanyin for worrying about his brother. Just as he couldn't truly be mad that Jin Guangyao was next to Xichen, who worried about his brother as well.

He never thought he'd be grateful Huaisang was so weak until this moment.

**Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian led their Sect towards the staircase of the Indoctrination Bureau. The Jin Sect, led by Jin Zixuan, was to the far left. Nie Huaisang stood to the right with his Sect.**

**"Jin-gongzi," Wei Wuxian called out.**

**Jin Zixuan looked at him, rolled his eyes, then turned back to the staircase.**

**Wei Wuxian turned to Nie Huaisang, who waved, "Wei-xiong." He leaned forward, "Jiang-xiong."**

**Wei Wuxian continued looking around, "Jiang Cheng, where are the people from the GusuLan?"**

**Jiang Cheng joined him in searching for the missing Sect. Nie Huaisang grimaced and looked down, while Jin Zixuan's expression tightened.**

**"What do you think?" Wei Wuxian asked, "Is there something wrong?"**

**Jiang Cheng leaned closer, "It might be good that Lan Wangji isn't here. Don't forget he has the Yin Iron shard. Chances are Wen Chao failed to find him and he is hiding himself."**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, "But I feel there's something wrong here."**

"Soulmates," Lan Xichen repeated. For the first time he thought maybe, just maybe, Wei Wuxian reciprocated his brother's feelings. At least, back then, when he was still Wei Wuxian and not the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation.

He suddenly understood Jiang Wanyin's dislike. It was another matter he was a hypocrite in.

He was beyond grateful for all Wei Wuxian did for Wangji during their quest for Yin Iron. He knew his debt would only grow as they saw what happened during Indoctrination. With his broken leg and broken heart, Wangji needed Wei Wuxian more than ever.

Just as in this moment in time, he had needed A-Yao.

The way Jiang Wanyin was acting...it was something he should have figured out sooner. Wei Wuxian got hurt helping Wangji. Badly. In a way Wangji either didn't know or didn't admit to knowing. It was so easy for Jiang Wanyin to blame Wangji for it, just as Lan Xichen blamed Wei Wuxian for the struggles Wangji faced trying to help him.

And maybe the hurt neither of them knew about was the reason Wei Wuxian decided loving Wangji wasn't worth it.

**Jiang Cheng met his gaze, "Take care of yourself first, okay?"**

**Wei Wuxian didn't look happy with that, but before they could continue their discussion someone announced, "Wen-er-gongzi is here!"**

**Wen Chao descended the stairs.**

**"Wen-er-gongzi is here," His disciple repeated, "Everyone, form a queue."**

**"Look at yourselves," Wen Chao started, "You all look like sleepy mangy dogs." Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes while Wei Wuxian looked away. Nie Huaisang's gaze darted nervously between his friends and Wen Chao, who kept speaking, "Why the hell don't you bring him over?"**

**Wei Wuxian turned around to see the disciples parting. Lan Wangji strode towards him, not sparing a glance for anyone, not even Wei Wuxian.**

It reminded all of them of their first meeting.

Er-ge gestured him closer, and Jin Guangyao went easily enough. He lowered his voice so not even Hanguang-Jun could hear them, "Wei Wuxian loved him."

"What makes you say that?" He whispered back, neither confirming nor denying it. Nor did he correct the tense of the verb.

"A-Yao," Er-ge scolded, "I thought, all this time, Wangji's feelings were unrequited."

Jin Guangyao sighed, "Does it make a difference? He chose not to act on them."

"Why?" His sworn brother looked confused, "Surely he saw Wangji cared about him in return. Why push him away?"

This was easy to answer, "Because Wei Wuxian is not worthy of Hanguang-Jun's love."

"Worthy?" Er-ge repeated, his confusion growing, "A-Yao, you make it sound like love is something you earn."

"Isn't it?" Jin Guangyao tilted his head.

"Love is a gift," He whispered even softer, "Trust...trust is earned."



“So you could love someone you didn’t trust?”

Er-ge grabbed his hand, “Do you think I don’t love you?”

His hand burned. Jin Guangyao found himself at a loss for words. He knew he earned some measure of affection from his sworn brother. He saved his life. He spied for him. He helped him rebuild Cloud Recesses. But all that meant little when Er-ge saw what type of person he truly was. When he saw his crimes...how could he ever love someone who could never earn it?

Love couldn’t be a gift. It had to be something he could earn, because if it wasn’t...

If it wasn’t, what the hell was he doing in the Jin Sect?

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian whispered as he came to a stop next to him. If they hadn’t known he’d had his leg broken, his face didn’t give away any of his pain. At being ignored, Wei Wuxian stepped closer, “Lan Zhan.”**

**Jiang Cheng pulled him back, “Wei Wuxian, don’t cause any trouble. As long as he is fine, you’ll get a chance to ask him about everything. That thing might be sent into the Cold Pond Cave.”**

**“I know,” Wei Wuxian shoved his hand off, then continued staring at his friend, “Lan Zhan.”**

**Lan Wangji ignored him.**

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian insisted.**

“Why didn’t you respond?” Jin Zixuan asked.

Lan Wangji stopped trying to eavesdrop on his brother’s conversation. He missed the first part, but caught the end about love. Lianfeng-Zun believed love was something that needed to be earned. His brother knew love was involuntary. A fundamental misunderstanding.

If there were ever a moment for his brother to speak of their parents...

“Hanguang-Jun?” Jin Zixuan added.

“It was safer for him,” Lan Wangji answered, “They thought I knew where the last piece of Yin Iron was. If they saw me speaking with anyone, that person would be under suspicion.”

Jiang Wanyin glared, “Did you think not acknowledging him would dissuade him?”

“No,” In hindsight, there was no protecting Wei Ying, even in this manner. There was nothing he could do to stop his beloved’s self-sacrificing tendencies.

“Aish,” Nie Huaisang shook his head, “We could have done better, but it could have been worse.”

**“Silence,” Wen Chao’s attendant commanded, “No talking.”**

**“Since you are all here in Qishan,” Wen Chao paced, “You shall follow Qishan’s rules. First and foremost, during the indoctrination, no one is allowed to carry weapons personally.” Jiang Cheng startled, and Wei Wuxian’s attention returned to the enemy, “In Case of disturbing His Excellency. Now let us start. Hand in your swords one by one.”**

**Everyone’s grip tightened on their swords.**

**“A cultivator stands with his sword, always!” The disciple from the Yao Sect declared, “There’s no way we would surrender our swords. I refuse!”**

**“Never before have we heard that we have to surrender our swords. We refuse!” Another raised their voice.**

**“Who spoke?” Wen Chao closed his eyes, “From which Sect? Step out from the crowd.”**

**No one stepped forward.**

**“It is precisely because of disciples like you, who know nothing about obedience and etiquette, whose cores are totally and utterly rotten, that His Excellency has decided to indoctrinate you,” Wen Chao pointed in the direction of Nightless City, “If your manners aren’t corrected early on, some of you might attempt to challenge the authority and tread upon the Wen Sect’s heads.”**

**“Confiscate their swords!” Wen Chao raised his voice.**

It was good that three of the representatives of the four Major Sects already knew to take Wen Chao’s threats somewhat seriously.

Otherwise this would have ended in a massacre.

If Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji, Jiang Wanyin, and Nie Huaisang hadn’t seen Wen Chao was more serious than his reputation suggested, they would have resisted like the Yao and Jin disciples. But they didn’t react other than being surprised at his audacity. Their disciples followed their lead.

They didn’t rebel there.

While not everyone survived, some did, which they had to take as a victory.

**Jin Zixuan snorted. Jiang Cheng grabbed Wei Wuxian’s arm before he could do anything.**

**“Why are you restraining me?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**“I fear that you will cause trouble,” Jiang Cheng answered honestly.**

**“Relax,” Wei Wuxian assured him, “Although I am disgusted by Wen Chao, I am not going to bring any trouble to our Sect during this time.” He then stuck his sword out, “Here you go.”**

**Jin Zixuan rolled his eyes again as Jiang Cheng handed over his sword. Lan Wangji followed a moment later.**

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian whispered again, but got no response.**

**Nie Huaisang laughed, “Here. Here.” He passed his over, his smile falling as soon as the Wen disciple turned away.**

**When they went to grab Jin Zixuan’s, he moved it out of reach, “The Jin Sect stands with our swords. If you want our swords, you will have to take us with you.” Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng turned to look at him in surprise.**

**“You dare challenge His Excellency?” Wen Chao asked.**

**“Wen-gongzi,” Jin Zixuan replied, “We are here to be indoctrinated. Do not push it too far.”**

**“Did you think we were all cowards?” Nie Huaisang asked.**

**Jin Zixuan grimaced, “I didn’t understand what was happening. I didn’t know any of you well enough to...”**

**To not make an idiot of himself. To not accidentally risk all of their lives over and over again.**

**Before he realized he needed to change as a person, he dismissed the debt he owed Wei Wuxian for the Indoctrination Camp. He figured since Wei Wuxian was really trying to help Lan Wangji, he didn’t owe him after he pulled his unconscious body out of that cave.**

**He wasn’t looking forward to seeing what the debt actually was.**

**“Don’t worry about it,” Nie Huaisang waved his hand, “We all thought you were very brave.”**

**Did they? Jin Zixuan glanced at his brother-in-law, who met his gaze then sighed, some of his earlier tension draining away, “Wei Wuxian was very impressed by you here.”**

**“Really?” He...didn’t know what to think about that, “And you?”**

**Jiang Wanyin rolled his eyes, “Any idiot can be brave.”**

**Wen Chao laughed, then came down the steps, “See what I was talking about? Some of you already have bad intentions. Am I right?” He turned his glare on another, “Lan-er-gongzi.” Wei Wuxian once again stared at him, “Some of you, and not just the GusuLan, are trying to stage a coup. You are one of the rebels!” He pointed at Jin Zixuan.**

**“Soldiers, take him into custody,” Wen Chao ordered.**

**Jin Zixuan moved to draw his sword, but MianMian moved forward, “Gongzi.” She stopped him, then turned and saluted, “Please pardon him for this.” She requested, “It is the Jin Sect’s precept. Our Gongzi has no intention of offending you. I beg for your forgiveness.”**

**“MianMian, there’s no need to beg for forgiveness,” Jin Zixuan said, “There are no cowards in the Jin Sect.”**

**Wen Chao came even closer, staring at MianMian, “You do look pretty.” He reached his sword out towards her, “What is your name?”**

**Jin Zixuan started, but MianMian just bowed again, “Wen-gongzi, the Wen Sect and Jin Sect have always been close. Upon our departure, our Sect Leader has instructed us not to neglect the Wen’s commandments, decrees, and statutes.” She smiled.**

**“Alright,” Wen Chao agreed, “For your sake, I will pardon your Jin-gongzi this time.”**

**MianMian smiled and bowed deeper.**

**“Thank you,” Jiang Yanli smiled, almost certain her husband never thanked any of them for protecting him from himself.**

**MianMian returned the smile, “Wen Chao was a womanizing toad. If being pretty is all it took to change his mind, I am very pretty.”**

**“That wasn’t why I brought you along,” Her husband blurted out, “I wouldn’t have brought you at all if I knew Wen Chao would be like-”**

**“I lived, Jin-gongzi,” MianMian dismissed.**

**Jiang Yanli assumed it was terrifying. There weren’t many female disciples at the Indoctrination. Then again, MianMian rose to a rather high position as a disciple with her father-in-law in charge. She dealt with lecherous looks every day as an unmarried woman. This was no different.**

**Except there, A-Xuan couldn’t protect her.**

**He couldn’t protect himself.**

**Wen Chao turned away, “Soldiers, take his sword.”**

**Jin Zixuan still tensed when they drew closer.**

**“Gongzi,” MianMian spoke to him, “Have you forgotten our Sect Leader’s exhortation? For the greater good, just endure it for a little while. Please don’t make it difficult for our Sect Leader.”**

**“Are you going to surrender your sword or not?” Wen Chao demanded.**

**Jin Zixuan reluctantly passed his sword over.**

**“I will spare you this time,” Wen Chao continued walking away, “For the sake of the Jin Sect’s old leader. But let me be clear, if any of you dares to disobey my orders ever again, I will show no mercy.”**

**Wei Wuxian glanced at Lan Wangji, but didn’t try to speak to him again.**

So this is where he realized how serious this was.

Jiang Cheng wished Wei Wuxian continued to take it seriously. To prioritize himself and their Sect before others. But no, his obsession with Lan Wangji led him to take unnecessary risks. If he’d just let them suffer, instead of taking on the suffering himself, maybe not everyone would have made it out alive.

But they would have. Wei Wuxian survived everything they threw at him.

Even if he didn’t know the full extent of it.

Jiang Cheng understood the attack on Lotus Pier was inevitable, but he let himself selfishly cling to the idea that there was still someone out there to blame. He killed Wen Zhuliu. He tortured Wen Chao to death with Wei Wuxian. None of that made him feel better. Nothing would ever fully quell his rage.

He knew it was unfair, but life was unfair. Because Wei Wuxian saved Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan, they were the first major Sect attacked after Indoctrination. They were the only major Sect to be destroyed. He hoped they felt guilty. He wanted them to be miserable when they watched his home be lost.

A part of him would always blame Lan Wangji, and hate him for it.

**When Wen Chao reached his elevated platform, he turned back, “Here is a book for everyone, *The Quintessence of the Wen Sect*. It is a collection of proverbs and glories from Sect Leaders and famed gentries of the Wen Sect. Every one of you needs to memorize each word by heart. I will ask someone to recite every sunrise, midday, and dusk from now on. Those who cannot will be punished according to our Sect’s rule.”**

**Nie Huaisang gaped.**

**Jiang Cheng leaned closer to Wei Wuxian, “Are you going to do it or not?”**

**Wei Wuxian put on a smile, raising his voice, “Yes, most definitely! And I am going to take a hard look...” He lowered his voice, “To see how sick the QishanWen can be.”**

After having their swords taken away, rote memorization wasn’t too terrible.

Lan Qiren sighed. It may not seem that bad, but they didn’t know how bad these students were when it came to memorizing anything. Wangji could if he wanted, but he wouldn’t here. Wei Wuxian was the same. Jin Zixuan and Jiang Wanyin weren’t poor students, but they learned better through real life application rather than reading the same thing over and over.

Nie Huaisang was hopeless on a regular day and even worse under pressure.

“Did you even try?” Nie Mingjue asked his brother.

“I tried!” Nie Huaisang defended himself, “It was all just stupid rules punishable by execution and public ridicule.”

**It cut away to Wen Qing in her own quarters at the Indoctrination Bureau. She approached Wen Ning in the kitchen, who rose with a smile, “Jie! You are back!”**

**She patted his head, “A-Ning. How have you been these days?”**

**“I am alright,” Her younger brother continued smiling, “I’m just a little bored. I’m glad you are back.”**

**She smiled, then turned to examine the food.**

**“By the way, Jie, I heard that Wen-zongzhu summoned disciples from each Sect to come to Qishan to be indoctrinated. Do you think Wei-gongzi and his fellows are going to be here?” Wen Ning inquired.**

**Wen Qing dropped the lid at the question, remembering Wen Ruohan’s warning. She closed her eyes, then grabbed her brother’s arm, “A-Ning, you need to remember, we are not the same kind of people as Wei Wuxian. We are never going to be friends with them. Even if they are here in Qishan, you’d better have nothing to do with them.”**

Nie Huaisang cringed. When he fainted, he half hoped she would be the one to attend to him. He thought he could speak to her freely in the medical pavilion. If he could just get her to admit she hated Wen Ruohan...well, then he could have smuggled her away from the Wen Sect.

He just hadn’t known her as well as Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian. He hadn’t been there when Wen Ning became indebted to Wei Wuxian.

Jiang Cheng grimaced, “Not everyone can be like Wei Wuxian.”

Nie Huaisang snorted in agreement. Some people valued their lives.

He still firmly believed Wei Wuxian shouldn’t have been at Indoctrination at all, but sometimes it felt like some higher power had it out for his friend. Or Lan Wangji. Both of them were left alone in a cave twice. The first time, Lan Wangji emerged with a Yin Iron shard in his possession.

Lan Wangji lost it, so destiny tried again.

No one else seemed to have realized it, except those involved, but if there was a time for Wei Wuxian to come upon another piece of Yin Iron, it was against the Xuanwu of Slaughter. After all, Lan Yi told them Xue Chonghai controlled one. If he controlled it using the Yin Iron, it made sense there would be a piece still there, masked beneath the monster’s resentment.

So the second time they were left alone in a cave, Wei Wuxian emerged with Yin Iron.

He used it to defeat the great evil of their time.

Some fates were written in stone. They were unavoidable, unchangeable. Others were written in sand, where even a gentle breeze could shift its path.

If Wei Wuxian's life was meant to be a tragedy...ah, Nie Huaisang didn't know.

**"But why?" Wen Ning complained.**

**"You don't need to know," Wen Qing answered, "Stay away from them."**

**"But...Jie...Wei-gongzi is a nice person," Wen Ning protested, drawing his hand back and turning away, "He saved my life."**

**"A-Ning!" Wen Qing scolded.**

**Wen Ning looked back and lowered his gaze, "Jie."**

**"Do you not listen to your sister anymore?" Wen Qing demanded.**

**Wen Ning grimaced, then nodded.**

**It cut away to Jiang Cheng unpacking while Wei Wuxian examined the book they were required to memorize. He chuckled, "Well, this is a proverb I did not expect to come from the Wen Sect."**

**"What does it say?" Jiang Cheng asked.**

**Wei Wuxian spun around, "Here, let me read it for you." He placed his finger on the page, "Those who count on their Sect, and do evil at will shall all be executed." Jiang Cheng paused, then shook his head in amusement, "Not only shall they be executed, but also decapitated and reviled by the people to warn future generations."**

So he actually did it.

MianMian shouldn't be surprised. He memorized the Lan Sect rules despite flagrantly ignoring him. Perhaps it was to irritate Lan Qiren more. It was one thing to act dumb and not know the rules, like Nie Huaisang. It was another to be one of the most competent people in the room so their teacher knew he knew the rules, and then still break them.

It was a good strategy to take with someone like Wen Chao. Men like him were quick to anger, and their anger made them quick to make mistakes.

But if Wei Wuxian was able to plan this part of their escape this far in advance...how did he end up despised by everyone?

How had he ended up exiled to the Burial Mounds if he was this aware? Did he want to end up there? Did he think he deserved to be there, as some sort of punishment for his demonic

cultivation?

The questions kept circling back to why he developed demonic cultivation at all, which she was beginning to fear was a lot more complicated than being a terrible necessity.

**Jiang Cheng continued shaking his head as Wei Wuxian kept talking, “If that is the case, the decapitated heads in Qishan are going to outnumber pig’s heads.” He chuckled to himself.**

**“It seems like thick skin is the Wen Sect’s true heirloom,” Jiang Cheng commented.**

**Wei Wuxian clicked his tongue, “I agree with that.”**

**As Jiang Cheng refolded one of his robes, he pulled out the comb he bought for Wen Qing in Gusu. He lifted it up.**

Huaisang grinned, “Don’t tell me you confessed during Indoctrination.”

Jiang Wanyin rolled his eyes, “We had bigger problems to worry about.”

“But you did speak with her,” Huaisang observed, “Privately...” His grin abruptly died, “Oh, yes, bigger things to worry about.”

Nie Mingjue glanced at him, but Lady Luo sighed, “At least she knew he was put in the dungeon.”

That damned dungeon again. Whatever happened there, Wei Wuxian didn’t tell anyone. From what he’d seen, Wei Wuxian only complained when the matter was inconsequential. He whined about his punishment in Cloud Recesses, but forgot the pain as soon as he saw Wangji in the cold springs. He said nothing when his neck was bruised from chains choking him.

Jiang Wanyin scowled, “It wasn’t the time to ask her to pick sides. Not with her life...”

“It was never her life though,” His brother mused, “It was Wen Ning’s.”

“Caring isn’t a weakness, Huaisang,” Xichen corrected again.

“Huaisang has a point,” Jin Guangyao spoke up, “Wen Ruohan wouldn’t have killed Wen Qing. He hoped to use her in a marriage alliance.”

“To who?” Jiang Wanyin demanded.

Jin Guangyao’s eyebrows went up, but he didn’t verbally answer. Nie Mingjue snorted. Who else could it be but a Jin? They were the only powerful Sect Wen Ruohan could have persuaded to his side with something like a marriage alliance and a promise of survival. The underlying question here was if Wen Ruohan would have Wen Qing marry Jin Zixuan or Jin Guangyao.



Nie Mingjue thought it was more likely Wen Ruohan would reward his faithful servant and install him as the heir to the Jin Sect. After all, Jin Zixuan and the disciples he brought with them were the Jin Sect's only contribution to the war. Such rebelliousness had to be put down.

**Wei Wuxian caught him staring at it, "Jiang Cheng, what are you thinking?"**

**Jiang Cheng hastily shoved it in his robes, "Nothing."**

**Wei Wuxian pursed his lips, then continued flipping through the book.**

**"Wen Qing..." Jiang Cheng started hesitantly, "Where do you think she is right now?"**

**"She should be here at Nightless City," Wei Wuxian answered, "I'm not sure if we will be able to meet with her. The Wen Sect is so petty." He sat up suddenly as he realized, "Something is not right. The Wen Sect is so petty. How come they only took Lan Zhan for indoctrination?" He frowned, "Something bad happened!" He got up to leave.**

**"Hey!" Jiang Cheng warned.**

It truly was a terrible place to be in love.

Madam Jin felt a pang of sympathy for the star-crossed pairs, but her eyes were on her nephew. Yes, Zixun didn't know when to keep his mouth shut most days and he caused no small amount of problems, but he was old enough to sit through these long celebrations without fidgeting. Yet there he sat, pulling on his robes as though he'd drank too much and was overheating.

There was no way he would get drunk here. Not after the embarrassment he'd caused at the crowd hunt. A-Xuan made him promise to behave.

Zixun shrunk in on himself, rubbing his chest when he thought no one was looking.

She narrowed her eyes. The bastard had dared to address the room again, and with it one of his earlier plots to usurp her son. Surely he didn't have lofty ambitions of being the next Sect Leader Jin? He couldn't be so arrogant, even if he allowed Zewu-Jun to shamelessly seek comfort from him in public.

Oh, that bastard was smart. He knew that even if some misfortune befell A-Xuan, Zixun would be the next in line. But if he started by removing Zixun...

Maybe fidgeting was just fidgeting, but it was uncharacteristic of Zixun to do so. And when someone acted uncharacteristically, it always spelled a plot in Koi Tower.

**When he opened the door, he was met with the crossed blades of the guards, "As per Wen-er-gongzi's command, wandering is not allowed during the indoctrination."**

**"I am just looking for someone," Wei Wuxian tried.**

**"Talking is not allowed either," The guard replied, slamming the door in his face.**

**Jiang Cheng rose, “Are we being treated as people or farm animals?”**

**Wei Wuxian thoughtfully tapped on the end of his nose, “I need to find an opportunity tomorrow.”**

**The next day, Wen Chao brought a chair to sit in front of him, “Boys and girls, have you all memorized *The Quintessence of the Wen Sect* ? Do we have a volunteer?”**

**No one stepped forward.**

**“Alright. Since there is no volunteer, I will start calling people out,” Wen Chao examined the crowd before him. Wei Wuxian started stretching, “Lan Wangji.” He pointed, “Wei Wuxian. Jin Zixuan.”**

**“No,” Lan Wangji responded, “I cannot.”**

**Wen Chao pointed at him, “Aren’t you one of the...so called Twin Jades of Gusu? Why can’t you even memorize a few words? You are not taking the Wen Sect seriously. Alright. Wei Wuxian, Jin Zixuan, you two go first.”**

**“I cannot either,” Jin Zixuan stated.**

**Wen Chao leaned forward, but before he could respond, Wei Wuxian stuck his hand in the air, “I will go first. I can do it.”**

**“He planned to be punished,” Lady Luo commented.**

Lan Xichen closed his eyes. Of course he did. He couldn’t speak to Wangji in front of Wen Chao, nor could he speak to him if they were sent back to their rooms. A shared punishment was somewhere different, thus an opportunity to speak privately. He wasn’t sure how this would turn into only Wei Wuxian in a dungeon...

No, he was almost certain it was to protect Wangji.

“He didn’t have many options,” Huaisang opened his fan, “He probably thought nothing would be worse than Madam Yu’s punishment.”

“Or that it was worth it,” Jiang Yanli tilted her head.

“It wasn’t,” Jiang Wanyin huffed.

Lan Xichen wished A-Yao would look at him, that maybe they could continue their earlier conversation. He couldn’t forget his words, nor their implications. Wei Wuxian loved Wangji, but it was entirely possible he just never picked up on Wangji’s reciprocation. Wei Wuxian might have thought himself unlovable because the only one who loved him openly was Jiang Yanli.

A-Yao might think himself unlovable because of his past, his upbringing and his crimes.

**Wen Chao laughed, delighted, “Wei Wuxian, you’d better do it right. If not, you will be punished.”**

**Wei Wuxian shot a devious look towards Lan Wangji, rolling his shoulders as he stepped forward. He continued stretching, twisting back and forth and swinging his arms. He started to bend to the side, then twisted again to stretch his back.**

**“Wei Wuxian!” Wen Chao shouted, closing his eyes in annoyance, “Are you going to do it or not?”**

**“Yes, I will!” Wei Wuxian said, “What is the hurry? I am going to get started now. Listen carefully.”**

**Jiang Cheng tensed, but pinched his lips together to stay quiet.**

**Wei Wuxian started pacing, “Thou shall not kill, fight, or lech.” Nie Huaisang’s lips tightened to contain his laughter, “Thou shall not shout, wander at night, or sprint.” Jin Zixuan smiled slightly, “Thou shall not bully the weak by being strong or tease others.” Lan Wangji finally looked at him, “Thou shall not breach laws.”**

A few Lan disciples couldn’t contain their laughter.

What better way to show Wen Chao that Indoctrination was just a pale imitation of the Cloud Recesses’ lecture than by reciting the Lan Sect rules?

It was enough to make even the strictest of them feel some admiration for Wei Wuxian. When their Sect had been at its weakest, and their Hanguang-Jun at his most broken, Wei Wuxian reminded them all that what they taught others wasn’t immediately forgotten. The Lan Sect, through their lectures, was more influential than any other Sect could achieve with money.

Maybe Lan Qiren had been too harsh with his nephew. If this was the young man he’d fallen in love with, they could understand breaking the rules trying to get him back.

It would be hard to fight the Jin and Jiang Sect for the right to rehabilitate the Yiling Patriarch, but there was arguably no better place than Cloud Recesses for spiritual recovery.

**“Wei-xiong has some nerve,” Nie Huaisang commented to Lan Wangji.**

**“Thou shall not skip class, or leave early,” Wei Wuxian continued, “Thou shall not sneer. Thou shall not sit improperly.” He said the last one with a pointed glance at Wen Chao.**

**“Shut up!” Wen Chao ordered, then pointed at him, “Wei Wuxian. How dare you read out loud the Lan’s principles here in Qishan?” Wei Wuxian pretended to look shocked, “Do you have a death wish?”**

**He tapped his lips with the book, “Is that right?” He hit his head, “I’m such a fool. I got it wrong. I apologize. I will try again.” Jin Zixuan bowed his head to hide his laughter, “Here you go-”**

**“Shut up!” Wen Chao shouted.**

More in the room snickered at just how frustrated Wen Chao was.

They pointedly did not think of how Wen Chao would channel that frustration to punish Wei Wuxian. Or how reluctant any of them were to see him beaten, see him endure any pain that would eventually warp him into the man he was today.

**“Do you think you can play me?” Wen Chao thundered. Wei Wuxian started stretching again, “Soldiers, take them to the vegetable garden...” Wei Wuxian smirked, and Nie Huaisang glanced at Lan Wangji, “To carry the dung!”**

**Jin Zixuan’s amusement evaporated. As did Wei Wuxian’s, “Ah? Carry the dung?” He turned back to look at Lan Wangji, who finally met his gaze, “Lan Zhan...”**

**The memory skipped to Wei Wuxian and Jin Zixuan carrying buckets of dung with pieces of fabric covering their nostrils, “See, isn’t my way a good way?” Wei Wuxian asked, then continued to the vegetable field, where Lan Wangji was already working to dump out his dung.**

**Wei Wuxian picked up a scooper, “Lan Zhan, do you want me to find a scooper for you?” Lan Wangji ignored him again, and Jin Zixuan snorted in amusement, before starting on his work. Wei Wuxian continued, “How come the Lan Sect only has a silencing spell, and not a smell-blocking one?”**

A few around the room laughed at them. To be fair, they did look like idiots.

Jin Zixuan found it annoying at the time. He thought he’d just been desperately trying to get Lan Wangji to speak. Now, he couldn’t stop wondering what was wrong with Wei Wuxian in a different way.

Was this punishment truly nothing compared to what Madam Yu put him through? Was he beaten regularly? Did he smile and laugh through this because Jiang Fengmian made it so he chose this? Did he feel he deserved this because he provoked Wen Chao? Did he think he deserved all his other punishments, because his mere existence provoked Madam Yu?

“This isn’t so bad,” A-Li whispered, as though to reassure herself.

“It was meant for Hanguang-Jun and I,” He squeezed her hand. He was there to comfort her now. He was there for her, in a way she wouldn’t let her brothers be. In a way she never had before, “And he was still smiling after his time in the dungeon.”

She pursed her lips, “A-Xian is always smiling.”

Was he? Jin Zixuan was more familiar with his rage than his happiness. Still, he believed her, “As are you. It doesn’t always mean you’re happy.”

Her expression faltered, “Ah...it’s silly to get upset about what we can’t change.”

“Then how will anyone ever know you’re upset?” He wondered. There were so many things in the world beyond his control, beyond any mortal’s control. Yet they were still worth getting upset about. Otherwise where would that grief go?

**Lan Wangji finished with what he had, and moved to pick his buckets up again to leave. Wei Wuxian quickly dumped his, uncaring of the smell, and announced, “I’ll be on my way.”**

**Wei Wuxian quickly caught up with Lan Wangji, “Lan Zhan. I heard that Wen Xu and some soldiers were on their way to Cloud Recesses, believing that Xue Yang’s Yin Iron shard was in our hands. When they weren’t able to find the Yin Iron shard, did they cause any trouble for you?”**

**Lan Wangji stopped walking, his expression becoming more pained with each reminder.**

**“Something bad happened, hasn’t it?” Wei Wuxian pressed, but Lan Wangji just continued walking, “Lan Zhan. Say something.” He placed a hand on his shoulder, and was immediately whipped for it. They both dropped their buckets.**

Jin Guangyao sighed.

It truly was a weakness to care. Wei Wuxian made it so obvious who he cared about, and he worried how this would influence his father. His father wouldn’t threaten Madam Jiang, and while it was easy to manipulate Jiang Wanyin, all they needed from him was to officially kick Wei Wuxian out of the Jiang Sect.

Beyond that, they needed Jiang Wanyin for the eventual attack on Wei Wuxian. They needed to have one person they knew Wei Wuxian would hesitate to hurt on a battlefield.

But manipulating Hanguang-Jun...well, it wasn’t something his father ever considered. It wasn’t something Jin Guangyao allowed his father to consider. Hanguang-Jun wouldn’t listen to his words, or the opinions of the masses. His will didn’t bend to anyone but his brother’s. Jin Guangyao did his best to avoid outright using Er-ge so far...

Some part of him knew it wouldn’t last forever.

**“I knew you wouldn’t be doing your work,” Wen Chao walked towards them, “What are you guys whispering about? Say it out loud.”**

**“Sure,” Wei Wuxian placed his hands on his hips, “I was just telling Lan Zhan that your vegetable garden smells really familiar. I was wondering what that smell was. Once you approached, it all came back to me.”**

**“What are you suggesting?” Wen Chao asked.**

**Wei Wuxian leaned closer and sniffed, “Isn’t that the smell on you?”**

**“How dare you?” Wen Chao snapped, raising his whip to hit him again.**

**Wei Wuxian caught it with one hand, pulling the cloth from his face, “Wen-gongzi, do not try me.” He threw the whip back.**

Jin Zixun shivered. So that was what Wei Wuxian looked like when he truly hated someone. Wen Chao was the one he tortured to death, and seeing what he’d done...

Jin Zixun had tortured and killed the Wens, but surely that was nothing to Wen Chao’s personal torment of Wei Wuxian? There was no way he’d drag his death out longer than that pathetic excuse for a person, not when Wen Chao was also responsible for the destruction of the Jiang Sect.

He was certain now Wei Wuxian didn’t curse him. But if it wasn’t him, then it was probably someone in the room. This viewing had shown how vicious and dishonorable many people secretly were, but which one decided to humiliate him?

**Wen Chao gestured to his men, who moved forward to restrain Wei Wuxian and lift him up. Before Wen Chao could beat him, Lan Wangji stepped in front of him, throwing his arms wide to protect him. Wen Chao aimed at his broken leg and beat him there.**

**“Wen Chao!” Wei Wuxian called out as Lan Wangji collapsed, “I am the one who insulted you. Come at me if you can.”**

**“It will be your turn soon,” Wen Chao glared, and started to beat him.**

**Jin Zixuan tore the cloth off his face, “Wen Chao, do not cross the line.” He warned.**

**“Oh, I am so scared,” Wen Chao mocked, but when he tried to hit Wei Wuxian again, Lan Wangji interfered, catching the whip and tugging it out of his grip. Jin Zixuan ran and stood slightly behind him.**

**Wen Chao backed away from Lan Wangji’s glare, his gaze flickering up to Wei Wuxian, “Put him down,” Wen Chao ordered, and Wei Wuxian collapsed to one knee. Lan Wangji immediately knelt down to check on him, “Wei Wuxian,” Wen Chao came closer, “Let’s have a talk. The chances are you want to ask Lan Wangji the whereabouts of the Yin Iron, right?”**

**“It is here in Nightless City,” Wen Chao gloated, “What further questions do you have?” He spread his hands, “You were on the right track.” He crouched down, “We, the Wen Sect, have three shards of the Yin Iron. Thanks to the gentleman next to you, Lan-er-gongzi. A wise man submits to his circumstances.”**

**Wen Chao plucked a piece of grass, “There is only one shard missing, if that bastard Xue Yang did not take it...” He gestured with the grass, “It must be you who hid it.”**

Everyone now knew that to be untrue.

Wei Wuxian did not possess any Yin Iron at this time. He didn’t steal it from Hanguang-Jun nor Xue Yang. In that respect, he was innocent.

The first of many things he'd been vilified for, Nie Mingjue was sure.

"This is where he gets thrown in the dungeon, isn't it?" Xichen asked.

Jiang Wanyin didn't answer. Huaisang nodded, "We didn't see him again until the next morning."

It was only mid-afternoon in the memory.

"What did you do to people in Wen Ruohan's dungeon, Lianfeng-Zun?" Jiang Wanyin asked.

The small man froze, "Ah, you'd be surprised how unreliable torture is when obtaining information. People will tell you anything at a certain point, and it's difficult to decipher what is true and what is just desperation."

"You get more out of people by pretending to be their friend," Huaisang added, making Jin Guangyao flinch, if just slightly. There was a hint of knowing in his brother's eyes. Not quite an accusation, but almost a curiosity, as though he were saying things just to see what response he would get.

It was a dangerous game to play in present company.

"But Wen Chao's an idiot," Jiang Wanyin grumbled, "And this isn't about the information. This is just to punish him." He straightened somewhat, "Forgive me for asking, Lianfeng-Zun."

"It's nothing," Jin Guangyao smiled, but there was something off about it.

It took a lot to shake his youngest sworn brother. He wished he could focus more on it, but Huaisang was saying more and more concerning things. While he admitted this viewing made him reevaluate Huaisang, there was a difference between not knowing a side of his brother and not knowing anything.

**Wei Wuxian just smirked.**

**"Wei Wuxian," Wen Chao continued, "Lan Wangji has no idea where the shard was hidden. I cannot say the same thing about you."**

**"Wen Chao, stop babbling," Wei Wuxian finally looked at him.**

**"We, the QishanWen, would never wrong someone," Wen Chao said, "As to whether you have a shard of the Yin Iron, we have plenty of time to find out. Soldiers, take him into the dungeon."**

**When the soldiers came, Lan Wangji rose and threw out an arm to protect Wei Wuxian.**

**"What's the matter?" Wen Chao taunted, "Does Lan-er-gongzi want to join him? The Wen Sect's dungeon is quite spacious."**

**Wei Wuxian stood with a laugh, pushing Lan Wangji's arm down and stepping forward, "Wen-gongzi, a dungeon is warm in winter and cool in summer. That's most welcome for me."**

**"Let's see how tough you can be," Wen Chao focused on him, "Take him!"**

**Held at swordpoint, Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan couldn't do more than watch him be taken away.**

**Off in the distance, Wen Ning also watched. He startled when his sister said, "A-Ning."**

**"A-Jie," Wen Ning replied.**

**"What are you doing here?" Wen Qing demanded.**

**"I..." Her brother trailed off, "I..."**

**She glanced away to see the Wen soldiers carrying off Wei Wuxian. Her expression tightened, "Haven't I told you to stay out of trouble already? Let's go."**

**"Yes," Wen Ning acquiesced.**

**A few relieved sighs were released around the room.**

**Wen Qing was aware of Wei Wuxian's trouble. There was a chance she would help him with whatever torment Wen Chao had planned.**

**In the dungeons, Wei Wuxian was forcibly dragged along in chains, "Hey, you have prepared a suite for me. Nice."**

**"There is something unique about this room," Wen Chao informed him, "You will see once you are there."**

**"Wen-gongzi," Wei Wuxian tapped his arm, "How nice of you."**

**Wei Wuxian walked into his cell, saw a monstrous dog, cried out and retreated. He trembled in his place, his face paler and his earlier confidence gone.**

**Jiang Cheng couldn't move. He couldn't breath. Rage filled his entire being.**

**How did Wen Chao know? No, he couldn't know. It was the best kept secret in Yunmeng that no dogs were allowed in Lotus Pier, much less near Lotus Cove. The previous disciples knew Wei Wuxian was terrified of them. The civilians knew that Jiang Cheng himself would drive any dog away that wasn't kept properly restricted to an area.**

**This was just more of Wei Wuxian's shitty luck.**

**But he'd promised. He'd promised to always be there to drive the dogs away. He looked at the trembling mess of his brother, and knew this night would be far more terrible than he'd imagined.**



“A dog?” Someone laughed, “Wei Wuxian can handle a dog!”

There were other such comments, but Jiang Cheng met his sister’s gaze.

Wen Chao couldn’t have found a better punishment if he had two brain cells to rub together.

**“Are you scared?” Wen Chao taunted as Wei Wuxian continued to shake, “Our Wei-gongzi got scared.” He moved to stand in front of him, “Wei Wuxian, tell me something. If you stay with him in this room, do you think you can make it to sunrise?” With that last remark, Wen Chao shoved him into the cell and locked the door.**

**Wei Wuxian stared at the snarling animal, before shouting in terror and running back towards the door, “Open the door!” He demanded, “Open the door!”**

**“Wei Wuxian,” Wen Chao’s voice came through it, “If you can survive the night, I will let you off the hook. If you die here, well then, you have no one to blame but yourself for being a smart-ass.” Wei Wuxian continued desperately beating on the door, “Just stay here and enjoy your long night with him.”**

**“Wen Chao!” Wei Wuxian shouted, his voice taking on a note of begging, “Asshole! Open the door!”**

**Realizing he was gone, Wei Wuxian backed himself into a corner. Instead of trying to fight back, when the monster came closer he shielded his head and cowered.**

“What’s wrong with him?” Lan Wangji demanded.

Wei Ying didn’t get scared. Not like this. Not to the point of being a pale, trembling mess who would beg their enemy for release. Wei Ying laughed in the face of monsters far larger than this. He faced death with a calm certainty. What about this was affecting him so much more?

“Leave it,” Jiang Wanyin growled.

“No,” Jin Zixuan’s eyes were wide, “This was supposed to be Hanguang-Jun or me. Wei Wuxian never...”

Never would have been the target of Wen Chao’s wrath if it wasn’t for Lan Wangji.

Nie Huaisang fanned himself nervously, “Does it surprise you? He said earlier all he remembered of his childhood was being chased by wild dogs. He spent years on the streets, fighting for scraps with dogs.”

“He’s scared of dogs,” Lan Wangji put together.

“He gets like that if there’s so much as a puppy,” Nie Huaisang bit his lip, “He doesn’t calm down until the dog’s out of sight or he finds Jiang-xiong.”

“Is he still scared of them?” Sect Leader Yao asked, as though this was something they would use against him.

Lan Wangji rose to his full height, but Nie Huaisang beat him to respond with a laugh, “I don’t know. It’s not like there’s any dogs in the Unclean Realm.”

“You said they bothered your birds,” Nie Mingjue bit out, his eyebrows furrowed.

“They do!” Nie Huaisang insisted, “But Jiang-xiong said if Wei-xiong was ever going to visit the Unclean Realm, I had to promise there wouldn’t be dogs.” That only made the suspicious furrow grow deeper, but Nie Huaisang turned his attention to the other Sect Leader, “And I really don’t think we should be throwing things at Wei-xiong that might make him lose control, do you?”

That made everyone’s scheming grind to a halt. They’d all seen Wei Ying struggle to control the resentful energy when he was angry. How would it act if he were made irrationally afraid?

“No dogs,” Lan Wangji bit out.

“No dogs,” Jin Zixuan echoed, but he was still pale.

Wei Ying faced his worst fear. It should have been one of them instead.

But Lan Wangji couldn’t deny some small surge of pride. After all, there were no pets in Cloud Recesses. No pets meant no dogs.

**The scene cut away to Jiang Cheng trying to leave his room, only to be ordered by the guards to get back.**

**“Where did you take Wei Wuxian?” Jiang Cheng demanded.**

**“Do not ask what does not concern you,” The guard replied, “And do not bring me trouble.” He shoved the Sect Heir back.**

**“Stop,” Wen Qing commanded, striding up the stairs swiftly. The guards immediately bowed, “You are excused,” She dismissed them, and met Jiang Cheng’s gaze.**

**“Where is Wei Wuxian?” They both asked at the same time.**

In any other circumstances, it would have been funny.

**Wen Qing frowned, “Isn’t he back yet?”**

**“Wasn’t he taken by Wen Chao?” Jiang Cheng frowned back.**

**Wen Qing looked away, then let out a breath as she realized where he must be. As she turned around, Jiang Cheng called out, “Wen-guniang.” She looked back, “Wen-guniang...” He repeated, softer, “I...Was Wen Ruohan hard on you?”**

**“I will try my best,” She didn’t answer, but nodded meaningfully.**

**Jiang Cheng let her walk away.**

Jiang Yanli smiled slightly. This wasn't enough to make her forget A-Xian was trapped with his worst nightmare, but it was sweet to see how much Wen Qing cared for both her brothers.

Maybe the Burial Mounds weren't so bad with those two together.

Her husband squeezed her hand, "I suppose we'll have to get a cat then."

"A-Ling doesn't need pets," She was happy she no longer had to conceal why she refused to get their son a puppy.

"It can get lonely in Koi Tower," A-Xuan whispered, "Especially in his position."

"Then he can go to Lotus Pier," Where rank didn't matter as much and her son could make friends without having to worry about ulterior motives, "Or Cloud Recesses." Where A-Xian and Hanguang-Jun would let him play with bunnies with the other young Lan disciples, "Or even the Unclean Realm."

They owed Huaisang for this. Certainly enough to treat him like family. Besides, after seeing the chasm between Guangyao and Sect Leader Nie, it was probably best for A-Xuan to handle Sect relations there.

"He won't be lonely," She promised. Not like they were.

**When it went back to Wei Wuxian, he was in the jaws of the beast. He continued to cry out as he was thrown against the wall, blood and sweat covering his skin. Even as the beast approached, he just pressed his hand against his wound, unable to defend himself. Before it could continue its attack, it suddenly collapsed.**

**Wei Wuxian stared at it, then noticed three needles in its neck, "Bufotoxin Needle." He muttered to himself, "Wen Qing."**

**But it was Wen Ning who knelt by the window into the cell, "Wei-gongzi." He called out in concern, "Wei-gongzi."**

**Wei Wuxian pushed off the wall, "Wen Ning," He crawled over to the door.**

Nie Huaisang relaxed, "They saved him."

"Would he really have died?" Da-ge asked.

"He wouldn't have fought back," Nie Huaisang grimaced.

He wasn't sure what was going through his brother's head, and he didn't like it. He knew he should tone it down on his remarks, but he needed to see how San-ge would react. Da-ge might have already given up on him, but there was no denying that San-ge cared about Er-ge. Maybe enough to betray his father, if pushed to make a choice.

They'd never know if no one pushed.

His older brother frowned, “He’s that scared?”

Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes, “You don’t know how paralyzing fear is, how stupid it makes you.”

Da-ge looked at him, “Is that why you act stupid?” Nie Huaisang forced himself not to react, “What are you afraid of?”

Losing his brother.

Deeper than that, it was what would happen to him after he lost his brother. Nie Huaisang held himself back because he knew what his brother would think of that path. He manipulated and schemed, but only for smaller things. Nothing as widespread as this until now, and he never thought he would act like this while his brother was alive to see it.

He was scared of this conversation. There were many ways to lose someone.

So he forced a smile, “I don’t know what you mean.”

**“Wei-gongzi, how is your wound?” Wen Ning asked, “Oh, I almost forgot. I brought you some medicine.” He reached into the cell, “This is a natural energy booster. It can help you stabilize your energy and enhance your core.” Wei Wuxian accepted the vial, “And here, this can help you stop the bleeding. It is for external use only.”**

**Wei Wuxian weakly took the packet of herbs, “Let’s set these aside.” He tucked them away, “How are you and your sister?”**

**“Jie is fine. There is no need to worry,” Wen Ning assured him, “However, since Wen Chao brought her back, she has indeed been reprimanded by Wen-zongzhu.”**

**“Because of me and Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian admitted.**

**Wen Ning nodded sadly, “I am not sure what Wen-zongzhu said to her. Anyhow, she has been acting weird ever since she got back. And she told me...She told me to...”**

**“Stay away from Lan Zhan and me,” Wei Wuxian finished. He smiled slightly, “Was it really necessary? Dealing with everything on her own.”**

“Hypocrite,” Jiang Wanyin hissed.

Lan Xichen just closed his eyes. He’d once accused Wei Wuxian of being selfish, of not caring how his actions affect those around him. It was almost physically painful to see how wrong he was, how Wei Wuxian was bleeding and in pain in a dungeon but still worried about Wen Qing. Still worried about someone whose cousin was torturing him.

“I’m surprised Wen Qionglin would take such a risk,” Lan Xichen commented.

“Are you?” A-Yao didn’t turn to look at him, but at least he responded.

“They were even after Wen Qing saved their lives,” He continued the conversation.

“It’s not that simple,” His younger sworn brother stared straight forward.

It was never simple. Nothing about this whole situation was simple. But if no one ever made an effort to explain, how could they ever reach an understanding?

**Wei Wuxian pressed against his injuries, wincing in pain. He then took one of the energy boosters, “Wen Ning, thanks a lot.”**

**“Wei-gongzi, there is no need to thank me,” Wen Ning replied, “I feel terribly sorry for the things they have done, especially for what happened to Cloud Recesses.”**

**“What happened to Cloud Recesses?” Wei Wuxian demanded.**

**Wen Ning gasped, “Did you not know? When Wen Xu got back from Cloud Recesses, he announced that he destroyed the house of the Lan Sect and that the place has been renewed. I have also heard he set a fire and burned down half of Cloud Recesses. What has been a sanctuary for hundreds of years was ruined just like that.”**

**Wei Wuxian breathing hitched, “Is Lan Zhan wounded?”**

**“Because the last shard of the Yin Iron was nowhere to be found, Lan-er-gongzi was brutally beaten and his leg was broken by Wen Xu,” Wen Ning revealed.**

**Wei Wuxian’s expression twisted in anger, “That is outrageous!” He punched the ground.**

**“Wei-gongzi, please calm down,” Wen Ning pleaded, “Mind your wounds.” He glanced back worriedly, “I cannot stay for long. Jie will find out. Take the medicine.”**

**Wei Wuxian brought his hands together in a weak salute, “Wen Ning, no words can express my gratitude.”**

**“Take care,” Wen Ning advised, then retreated.**

**Wei Wuxian examined the pouch of herbs, but stopped before he applied any, “I should save this medicine for Lan Zhan,” He whispered to himself, then tucked it away.**

**“Does Wei Wuxian love Hanguang-Jun?”**

No one could pinpoint who exactly asked that question.

It felt like a ridiculous question, but watching Wei Wuxian continue to place Hanguang-Jun’s well-being above his own made them doubt. How could the son of a servant ever hope to attain the Second Jade of Lan’s hand? How audacious? Even if they were equal in terms of cultivation, it simply wouldn’t be a good match.

No matter how much Lan Wangji obviously loved him.

Lan Wangji didn’t dare hope. Wei Ying would place anyone’s well-being above his own as long as he thought they deserved it. Of course he wouldn’t use the medicine on himself when

there was a chance another needed it more. He would have done this for anyone.

**Wei Wuxian woke up to the sound of footsteps approaching his cell. He moved quickly to remove the needles from the beasts' neck.**

**“Wei Wuxian,” Wen Chao called out, “Are you still breathing? How many legs do you have left? How did our cute little pet treat you last night?”**

**The cell door opened, and Wei Wuxian stared up at him from the ground. Wen Chao looked over his injuries, then turned to the beast, “You can’t even take the meat within your reach. I guess we feed you too well. You piece of trash.”**

**“Wen Chao,” Wei Wuxian spoke, “What kind of person are you to let a beast fight your fight?” Wen Chao turned back to him, “If you have a spine, let’s fight one-on-one.”**

**Wen Chao shushed him, “Take it easy. Today is your lucky day. We have plenty of time together.”**

**With that, the guards came in and grabbed Wei Wuxian, “Let’s go.”**

**They brought him to where the Sect Heirs were waiting.**

**Jiang Cheng immediately called out, “Wei Wuxian.”**

**Wei Wuxian smiled, “Good morning to you all.” He was still obviously injured, but was able to take his place cheerfully.**

**“What happened?” Jiang Cheng demanded, “What did they do to you?”**

**Wei Wuxian glanced at Lan Wangji, who also waited for his answer, “This is something you do not understand. These are my glorious...” He winced in pain, “Battle scars.” Jiang Cheng couldn’t look at him, “What?” Wei Wuxian nudged him, “Did you miss me already?”**

**MianMian shook her head. Was he truly that blind to how worried they were?**

**Jin Zixuan would have died had he been the one put in the dungeon. Wen Chao obviously intended for someone to die, and he didn’t seem to care all that much about which Sect his victim came from. Jin Zixuan wasn’t someone Wen Ning or Wen Qing would risk their lives for, not in the same way as Wei Wuxian or Hanguang-Jun.**

**And with Hanguang-Jun’s injured leg, who knew if he would have survived long enough to be rescued?**

**“How can he smile?” She wondered.**

**“It’s easy,” Nie Huaisang shrugged, “When you don’t want to trouble others with your troubles.”**

She wished her friend would stop worrying Sect Leader Nie with his words, but she also didn't know what happened to him in Indoctrination. Everyone else went on the night hunt for the Xuanwu. Everyone else either died in or escaped from that cave. Nie Huaisang was left behind.

She didn't dare ask what happened, but she hoped that was why Sect Leader Nie kept looking increasingly worried.

**Jiang Cheng shoved him, "You wish! I think you haven't had enough. You have not learned your lesson."**

**"Please," Wei Wuxian interjected, "Being in a place like that once is enough." He turned around, "Nie-xiong, have you eaten anything? Something like osmanthus cake or rose crisps. I was held in that damned place all day without food." He clutched his stomach, "I am starving."**

**Nie Huaisang walked over to him, "Osmanthus cake? You're kidding. Do you think we are still attending lectures with the Lan Sect?"**

**Realizing how much had changed, they all fell silent.**

So much had changed so quickly.

Only a few months ago, they were studying in Cloud Recesses, only Wen Chao's rude arrival gave any indication to the Wen Sect's ambitions. They played, and drank, and studied, without the weight of their Sect's on their shoulders.

And yet, this was only the beginning of the end still.

This wasn't what started the Sunshot Campaign.

**"There are no osmanthus cakes," Jiang Cheng broke it, "But there are steamed buns." He pulled one out, "You will have to make do."**

**Wei Wuxian smiled again, and the two watched him eat. Wei Wuxian brought up an arm to lean on his brother, "It's yummy."**

**"Here comes Wen-er-gongzi!" The Wen disciple announced.**

**Nie Huaisang hurried back to his place.**

**This time, Wen Chao wasn't alone.**

**"Wen-guniang," Nie Huaisang noted.**

A few smiled.

Wen Qing tried to stay away, but of course she cared too much to once she saw Wen Chao was serious about hurting them.

She truly was too kind for her Sect.

**“Before today’s indoctrination begins, I have a few announcements,” Wen Chao began, “First of all, you guys have probably heard, from now on, Cloud Recesses is under Qishan’s control. And secondly, the QingheNie who were insubordinate to our instructions and showed a lack of discipline, are deemed irreverent. His Excellency has ordered a crackdown.”**

**“What happened to Da-ge then?” Nie Huaisang asked.**

**“He was a hothead who put up a desperate fight,” Wen Chao replied, “What do you expect?”**

**Nie Huaisang staggered back a step.**

Nie Huaisang ducked his head.

This was the worst for him. Not knowing what was going on outside the camp was the highest form of torture when he could imagine so much devastation.

**“I was fine, Huaisang,” Da-ge offered.**

**“I didn’t know,” He whispered back. And because he didn’t know, he decided to escape.**

Not that it had been for much, as everyone escaped later that day as well.

**“And then,” Wen Chao continued, “There is the LanlingJin...”**

**“Wen Chao,” Jin Zixuan interrupted, gesturing angrily, “How dare you?”**

**“Jin-gongzi,” Wen Chao mocked, “Let me finish my sentence. The LanlingJin has been cooperative.” Jin Zixuan brought his hand back, “As long as you do not stir up trouble, I will guarantee your parents’ safety.” Wen Chao chuckled, “Alright. Now only one is left of the five main Sects. The YunmengJiang.”**

**Both Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian glared up at him, “It is a shame that Jiang Fengmian is such a coward, hiding away in Yunmeng.”**

**“Wen Chao!” Jiang Cheng warned.**

**Behind him, Wen Qing shook her head, warning them off doing anything further.**

**Wei Wuxian turned and clasped Jiang Cheng’s shoulder, copying Wen Qing’s gesture and shaking his head.**

**Wen Chao pointed, “You better suck it up. I can hardly wait to visit Lotus Pier myself right now.”**

**Wei Wuxian tightened his grip on his brother’s shoulder as his expression darkened.**



Jiang Cheng clenched his fists.

Another way Wen Qing saved them at Indoctrination. If it had been Wei Wuxian alone warning him off reacting, he wouldn't have listened. He would have just noticed his brother's injuries more and been angrier. But with Wen Qing there, he was immediately reminded of how many people were dependent on their good behavior.

If only it lasted. If only Wen Qing could have convinced Wei Wuxian to not respond to Hanguang-Jun as well.

**The memories skipped to the hostages reciting the book. Lan Wangji didn't have his open. Wei Wuxian was basically asleep on his feet. Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng barely muttered the words at all.**

**Nie Huaisang, who had his eyes closed, suddenly dropped his book and collapsed.**

**Wei Wuxian and the other heirs turned to look at him, expressions concerned.**

**"What a loser," Wen Chao sneered, "Take him out."**

**Nie Huaisang was bodily dragged away.**

**Wei Wuxian glanced at Jiang Cheng, who stared at where their friend had just been. Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan turned their glares on Wen Chao.**

"I'm sorry," Huaisang apologized.

"Don't be," Jin Zixuan waved his words away, "It was for the best you didn't go with us on that night hunt. I don't know if any of us could have protected you."

"And you got out just fine on your own," Jiang Wanyin crossed his arms.

Nie Mingjue froze, "What do you mean? Did he not escape with all of you?"

Around the room, those who survived Indoctrination exchanged looks. Jiang Wanyin lifted his chin, "Nie-zongzhu. Nie-xiong did not enter the cave with us, nor did he leave Indoctrination with us."

"I always assumed you sent someone to rescue him," Jin Zixuan revealed, "I heard he returned home before we even rescued Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun."

"We assumed he escaped with you," Xichen's eyes widened.

"Huaisang!" Nie Mingjue demanded. Did he escape on his own? Did the Wen Sect do something to him? Did Wen Ning help him escape? He couldn't think of a reason his little brother wouldn't tell him something so important.

"Da-ge," Huaisang ducked his head.

Jiang Wanyin snorted, “You underestimate your brother, Nie-zongzhu. There’s a reason he snuck to our rooms in Cloud Recesses and not the other way around.” He didn’t flinch when he turned his glare on him, “What? Nie-xiong probably knew how to escape the second he got there.”

Huaisang grimaced, “I’m sorry, Jiang-xiong.”

“Why are you apologizing?” Jiang Wanyin snapped, “Most of us found our way out of there eventually.”

Nie Mingjue didn’t have the patience for his brother's avoidance, “Huaisang! How did you get home?”

Huaisang fiddled with his fan, then closed his eyes, “It’s like Jiang-xiong said. I knew how to leave as soon as I got there. I only stayed because I thought...I thought I could find a way to get everyone out. Or at least Lan Wangji because he was hurt, and then Wei-xiong got hurt...”

If the words were said so nervously, Nie Mingjue might not have believed them. His weak little brother stayed somewhere he didn’t have to be out of loyalty to his friends? He thought he could be the hero? He never thought his little brother capable of something like this before watching his friends’ memories. He underestimated him entirely.

“Then Wen Chao implied you were dead...” Huaisang took a deep breath and looked up, meeting his gaze. His next words didn’t waver, “Did you think you were the only one of us capable of great vengeance, Da-ge? Did you think if you died there the Sunshot Campaign wouldn’t have gone exactly the same way?”

From the look in his eyes, he would have led their Sect to war.

He would have won. He would have avenged him and their father.

Huaisang was capable of anger and destruction, but he held himself back. He showed more restraint than anyone else in the Nie Sect.

What would happen if he decided to act on it? Was that what he was scared of?

Nie Mingjue thought about it, and felt a shiver run down his spine. Not for himself. Huaisang would never turn his rage on him. He felt a wave of pity for whatever poor soul ended up on the business end of his brother’s saber one day.

And whoever he was scheming against currently.

That could wait until they were in private.

Thanks you for all your comments! I don't think I'm actually going to write an escape scene, but I wanted to see what everyone thought!

Me: This is starting to be borderline XiYao.

Also me: Nah, that's just how good friends be.

I do not intend to make this XiYao. Sorry if anyone hopes for that!

Also, many have commented about my portrayal of JGY. I know I'm being nice to him, but as someone who has struggled with honesty, I have a lot of sympathy for him. For years, I thought if someone actually loved me, they'd be able to see through my lies like I could see through theirs. When no one could, it just fed the dark side of me that thought no one loved me until I broke down. I know it's not the same for JGY, but sometimes it's hard to be honest, even if being honest solves all your problems.

I hope you all continue to enjoy this!

# It's Field Trip Time!

## Chapter Summary

WC: We're going on a trip in our favorite-  
JZX: Shut the fuck up!

## Chapter Notes

Part 2 of why does Wen Chao talk so much?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Da-ge didn't say anything.

Nie Huaisang held his gaze. It was strange. Whenever he cowered and pretended to be an idiot, he was always calm beneath it. Now, when he was finally showing his brother what he was capable of if given the right motivation, he felt like curling into a ball and hiding. Part of him wanted to hide, to laugh this away as a joke.

"We'll talk more," Da-ge decided, looking away, "Later."

What did that mean?

They were on new ground, and Nie Huaisang did not know where he stood.

He hated it.

MianMian patted his arm, "I believe you would have come back if we hadn't escaped."

Oh, he hadn't even been paying attention to the rest of the room. While his brother took his words seriously, not many others did. He listened for a few moments. Most seemed to think he was just a lucky coward who saw an opportunity to leave and took it. Why would the Wen Sect guard him when he was the least threatening?

No one thought he would run away, so they didn't guard against the eventuality.

But that was the strength of a reputation. Wei Wuxian's reputation had never been bad until the war. Seeing these memories just reminded everyone of what they used to say about him before he became a demonic cultivator. There was a time where they only praised the Jiang Sect's Head Disciple. The only blemish on his reputation was his parentage, rumored and real.

Nie Huaisang's reputation was one of weakness. Yes, it was surprising he went on the quest for Yin Iron. Yes, it was surprising he escaped Indoctrination first. And yet, no matter how his actions contradicted their preexisting beliefs, those beliefs would persist.

He brought up his fan to hide the tight line of his mouth. Er-ge seemed to be the most puzzled by the contradiction, while San-ge...he looked almost impressed. Was he finally seeing him as an equal? Would he be threatened?

Nie Huaisang fanned himself as he met San-ge's gaze. He didn't want them to be enemies, but if San-ge insisted on supporting his father...

**The remaining heirs were still reading when a Wen disciple came with a message for Wen Chao. He listened, then asked, "Muxi Mountain? What's the matter?"**

**"We just got the news there are some bizarre events in Muxi Mountain," The disciple reported, "It's quite unusual. That place is a gathering ground for monsters. Ordinary people cannot enter. It is considered dangerous, even for cultivators. Hence, we suspect that there must be evil monsters. However, the people we sent out to repress if barely survived."**

**Everyone gave up the pretense of reading to listen, "So we reported our suspicions to you, Gongzi."**

**Wen Chao considered his message, before smirking, "It sounds like I will need to attend to the matter myself."**

**"Gongzi," The disciple warned, "That place is really creepy. Should we report it to His Excellency?"**

**"For what?" Wen Chao asked, "With this many human shields, are you afraid that we won't make it out unscathed?"**

**"Brilliant, Gongzi," The disciple agreed.**

**"The Xuanwu," Jin Guangshan leaned forward.**

Finally, they were coming to something useful. He presumed Wei Wuxian prevailed against the Xuanwu because he possessed Yin Iron. Now, knowing that couldn't be the case unless he found some in the next day, he wondered if this was where he would first try demonic cultivation. He'd theorized it before. Undoubtedly he'd given it further thought.

Or perhaps he and Hanguang-Jun were simply powerful enough to succeed where hundreds of others had failed.

He glanced at Guangyao to make sure he was paying attention, and his bastard met his gaze. He was still seated next to Zewu-Jun, but it was only right. After all, Zewu-Jun was watching his brother go through a trying experience. Why wouldn't he seek comfort from his sworn brother? It wasn't like Hanguang-Jun was...tactile.

It was where he needed to be anyways. Hanguang-Jun was uncontrollable, but Zewu-Jun?

Zewu-Jun was too kind for his own good.

**They left the Indoctrination Bureau. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng took the lead as they started down the path to Muxi Mountain. Wen Chao brought his mistress, Wang Lingjiao, along on a horse, while Wen Qing and Wen Zhuliu walked beside. Lan Wangji struggled to keep up on his broken leg in the back of the group.**

**Once they reached a certain point, they spread out.**

**Wei Wuxian crossed his arms as he heard Wen Chao laugh something into Wang Lingjiao's ear.**

**"They are shameless," Jiang Cheng muttered, "Look at him. What a disgrace."**

**"Have you ever heard the saying?" Wei Wuxian asked, "A whore with a troll is an everlasting couple. I suppose this is what it means."**

**"Where did you hear something like that?" Jiang Cheng wondered.**

**"It doesn't matter," Wei Wuxian grinned, "It just suits this place."**

A few people looked his way at the mention of whores, but Jin Guangyao ignored them. He nodded to his father, then pretended to watch, his mind racing with other matters.

He was glad Huaisang decided to reveal himself, as it gave him something else to think about other than Xichen and his father and the concept of love. It gave him someone to focus on.

Jin Guangyao often found himself at a disadvantage, but he always knew who his opponents were. That Huaisang was capable of hiding this from his brother was no surprise. That Huaisang hid his true capabilities from him...he thought he had Huaisang's trust. He never figured Huaisang into any of his plans, except as a reason to go to the Unclean Realm.

How long had Huaisang seen through him? This whole viewing was his work. Did he guess what his father's true ambitions were? Did he see the looming threat to Da-ge, even if he hadn't been specifically ordered to act yet?

What did he hope to gain? Huaisang could pretend all he wanted that this was for Wei Wuxian, but there had to be something in this for him. Something he wasn't seeing.

**When Wei Wuxian turned, he caught sight of Lan Wangji, whose limp was growing more obvious.**

**Jiang Cheng followed his gaze, and grabbed Wei Wuxian before he could go help, "What do you want to do now? Go and help him again? Do not be so reckless."**

**"Didn't I tell you what happened to the Lan Sect already?" Wei Wuxian asked, "Take a look at his leg. These days we have been running around, his injury must have been aggravating him. If I do not help him, he is going to lose his leg."**

**“That is enough, Wei Wuxian,” Jiang Cheng insisted, “You have helped him enough. He is probably not going to let you get close to him, not to mention carry him.”**

**“What he thinks is his business,” Wei Wuxian dismissed, “What I do is my business. Besides, he is not going to strangle me to death if I grab him and carry him on my back.”**

**“It’s hard enough to take care of ourselves,” Jiang Cheng argued, “We shouldn’t bother with someone else’s trouble.”**

**Wei Wuxian removed his hand from his arm, and grasped it tightly, “First of all, it’s not something trivial. And secondly, somebody should deal with the situation.” He patted him on the shoulder, then walked away.**

Somebody should deal with the situation.

But no one else was. No one else would.

Only Wei Wuxian was heroic enough at heart to risk himself entirely for the sake of another. The rest of them shied away from the hurt young man, too scared of sharing in his pain to get close. But Wei Wuxian, the one who Wen Chao had actually tried to kill already and only survived because of his friend...

Or maybe that was why he approached Hanguang-Jun. Everyone else had friends.

Hanguang-Jun stood alone.

**Wei Wuxian sped up to a run before stopping in front of Lan Wangji, “Lan Zhan, how is your leg?”**

**“Fine,” Lan Wangji answered.**

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian complained, “After all we’ve been through together, is there anything you can’t share? Are you sure your leg is okay?”**

**Lan Wangji looked past him, “It’s fine.”**

**Wei Wuxian stepped into his path, “Don’t pretend it’s fine all the time. How about...you let me carry you?”**

**Lan Wangji met his gaze, and Wei Wuxian smiled hopefully.**

**“Boring,” Lan Wangji dismissed, then pushed past him.**

**“Ah?” Wei Wuxian stared after him, “Hey! Lan Zhan, you...” He trailed off, but continued in his head, “*You stubborn fool.*” He placed his hands on his hips, “*If he keeps walking like this, his wound will get worse.*”**

Wangji was stubborn.

At least that hadn't changed.

Lan Xichen fought the urge to tear at his hair. It was one thing to have been blind to parts of A-Yao. They'd only known each other for a few years and depth of feeling didn't mean a depth of knowledge. However, he'd known Huaisang for over a decade. He watched him grow up.

What was next? Who else was hiding something monumental from him? Da-ge? Wangji?

Was his judgment that poor?

**Wei Wuxian thought about it for a while, falling into step in the back of the group, then reached into his robes and pulled out a paperman.**

**With a drop of his blood, he activated it, and it took off.**

**It landed on Wen Qing's shoulder, and he telepathically communicated, "*Wen-guniang, it's me.*" She glanced down at it, "*You don't need to answer. Just listen. I just want to tell you something. Thanks for your help last night. I know you have your own troubles, but I have another request. Wen-guniang, please.*"**

"What talisman is that?" Sect Leader Ouyang inquired.

This was a learning opportunity for all the minor Sects. In dire circumstances, the heirs to the Major Sects would use techniques typically kept secret. It was how they accrued power. Their secret techniques allowed them to dominate in night hunts, which gave them the advantage when it came to negotiating territory.

Lan Qiren stroked his beard, "Silent communication is a Lan technique."

"Wei Wuxian adapted it from there," Sect Leader Jiang grimaced, "He's always been fond of paperman talismans. I wouldn't recommend trying to copy them."

"Oh?" Sect Leader Yao leaned forward, "Is it dangerous?"

"To the user," The young Sect Leader warned, "A little spiritual energy can make them move how he wants to. Add more, and he can communicate. He can even use them to spy on others."

Many around the room shuddered. Their younger disciples used papermen to practice manipulating objects with spiritual energy. It was something small to work on both control developing the pathways for other spiritual weapons. To develop something so intricate from something basic...it was very Wei Wuxian.

"Don't be so scary, Jiang-xiong," Nie Huaisang laughed, "The more complex the action, the more connected Wei-xiong is to the paperman. If it were to be destroyed...well, the backlash wouldn't be pleasant."

So it was another test. Showing his own vulnerability along with Hanguang-Jun's to see her reaction.



Wen Qing glanced back to where Wei Wuxian had joined Lan Wangji at the rear of their group. His voice continued, “ *Could you figure out some way to let Lan Zhan rest?* ”

She didn’t take long to make a decision. She raised her hand, “Halt.” Everyone obeyed, “We will rest here. Go drink some water.”

They all wandered over to the river. Wei Wuxian stared at Wen Qing, who checked on Wen Chao before turning towards him. He saluted her, and she walked away.

Jiang Cheng walked up, looking between the two, “Wei Wuxian, what do you want again?”

“Nothing special,” Wei Wuxian replied, then turned around, “Lan Zhan, I’ll go fetch you some water.” He lightly hit Jiang Cheng on the stomach, before heading to the water. When he knelt, it was close to Wen Qing again, but he didn’t try to speak to her.

“You’re so considerate of certain people,” Wen Chao commented, coming up behind Wen Qing, “You don’t want them to get tired even for a bit.”

She rose and started to walk away, “You think too much.”

“I only better be,” Wen Chao warned, forcing her to stop. He came closer, “Wen Qing. Don’t blame me for not having warned you. You may not think of yourself, but you should think of your dear little brother.” She turned sharply to look at him, “Don’t mess with me.” Then he raised his voice, “Get up and start moving, all of you!”

Wen Chao’s death was too quick.

Jiang Cheng clenched his hands into fists. There were so many little pieces he missed. Of course Wen Qing gave them that break because Wei Wuxian asked her to. Of course Wen Chao noticed Wei Wuxian’s gratitude. Of course this made everything worse for everyone.

He held tight to his anger. It was better to be angry than to let himself think too hard about his own actions.

He didn’t feel much shame about not asking to help Hanguang-Jun. No one else had. He felt a little more about refraining from helping Jin Zixuan until left with no other choice. He had excuses ready for when he was inevitably asked why he and Wei Wuxian didn’t do more to prepare Lotus Pier when they all knew an attack was coming.

But his excuses ended there. Losing his parents wasn’t enough to excuse what he did...

He had barely been able to share the memory with the device, but his sister deserved to know. She deserved to know everything about what happened leading up to Wei Wuxian’s disappearance, and since he couldn’t bring himself to say it, he was left with showing it publicly.

Not that anyone else’s opinions mattered anymore.

**Once they all stood at attention, Wang Lingjiao walked in front of them, “It must be here. You must find the cave the monster lives in before dark, or you’ll have a rough time.”**

**Wei Wuxian wrapped his arm around Jiang Cheng, “Hey. Who is that woman? She’s bossing us around.”**

**“Oh, her?” Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, “She was just a handmaiden of Wen Chao’s wife. Because of her pretty face, Wen Chao soon had an affair with her. She’s incapable, but quite bossy because of Wen Chao.”**

**Wei Wuxian glanced back, then scoffed, “No wonder she is like a servant of the Wen Sect. Carrying only a piece of hot iron instead of a sword.”**

**“Her spiritual power is too scarce to carry a sword,” Jiang Cheng agreed.**

**His words were just loud enough to draw Wang Lingjiao’s attention, “You!” She shouted at them, “What are you doing here? Wen-gongzi ordered you to find the cave, not to have some secret talk.”**

**“What happened to her?” MianMian wondered.**

**“Wei Ying,” Hanguang-Jun answered simply.**

**She hummed, filling in the details for herself. She glanced at her friend, but Nie Huaisang was biting his lip behind his fan, only visible to her. She internally sighed. The point of this was to clear up misunderstandings, not cause more.**

**MianMian didn’t think Sect Leader Nie was angry. He was taking Nie Huaisang’s devious side rather well, considering his previous condemnation of Lianfeng-Zun. If anything, she thought he seemed proud. Maybe he was just happy that Nie Huaisang had some means of protecting himself, even if they weren’t his preferred ones.**

**She actually sighed this time. Nie Huaisang was so observant, so smart, but he couldn’t recognize his own brother’s pride because Sect Leader Nie had never been proud of him before.**

**Wen Qing approached and saluted, “Gongzi, we’ve searched everywhere. We found no cave.”**

**“No cave?” Wang Lingjiao echoed angrily, “You’re all useless. What a bunch of trash.”**

**Wei Wuxian looked around, then stepped closer to the river. Jiang Cheng grabbed his arm, “What are you going to do?”**

**Wei Wuxian brushed him off and moved further up the river. He pulled out a talisman, activated it, then sent it off. They all watched it fly away. After a few moments, Wei Wuxian snapped, and the fog parted in the distance to reveal a cave.**

**Jin Zixuan resisted the urge to start keeping a physical count.**

Wei Wuxian found the cave. If it weren't for him...well, he wasn't sure how long Wen Chao would have had them look or what he would do when his frustration grew.

But Wei Wuxian found it to spare Lan Wangji's leg. He couldn't really hold that against him.

Anyways, Wei Wuxian got them out of the cave, so that was even.

"What talisman is that?" Zixun asked.

Jiang Wanyin frowned, "Wei Wuxian always thought he could make something that tracks resentment. For water spirits."

"Could it be used for any type of resentment?" His cousin followed up.

"Probably," His brother-in-law paused, "If he's still working on it.

"I think he is," Nie Huaisang added, "One of his fake followers in Yiling was trying to sell a Compass of Evil, but I don't know if his fake followers know what he's doing."

Did anyone? Still... Jin Zixuan leaned forward, "Why are you so interested?"

Zixun averted his gaze, "No reason."

Nie Huaisang met his gaze over his fan, and he shook his head. So something was wrong with his cousin. Great. As if they didn't have enough problems to deal with. Why would he want to track resentment though? If it were a regular nighthunt they had Wei Wuxian's Lure Flags. If it was something larger Jin Zixuan would have been informed.

Or he should have been. There was a lot he didn't know about his own Sect.

**Wen Chao dismounted, and Wang Lingjiao cheered, "The cave!" She grabbed his arm, "Wen-gongzi, congratulations! Come on! Let's go!"**

**"Come on!" Wen Chao agreed, "Let's go!"**

**As the group moved on, the only ones to hesitate were Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji. The former quickly moved to help the latter walk on, keeping a firm grip on his arm in support.**

**Time skipped to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji leading the group into the cave, both with torches. They kept walking until the earth shifted beneath MianMian's feet, almost causing her to fall if Jin Zixuan hadn't pulled her back, "Are you okay?"**

**Wen Chao moved to whip MianMian, but Jin Zixuan blocked it, "Wen Chao! What are you doing?"**

**"What am I doing?" Wen Chao mockingly echoed, "What are you yelling about?" Lan Wangji turned and kept going, "Should the monster be disturbed, how will you take responsibility for that?"**

**“You brought us here,” Jin Zixuan replied, “Claiming that we’re going to hunt some monster. So please tell me, what on earth is this monster? You didn’t inform us of anything and took away our swords, which makes us ill-equipped.”**

Jin Zixuan...wasn’t that bad?

Jin Guangyao expected him to act differently during Indoctrination. Out of everyone there, he was the only one Wen Chao shouldn’t have dared touch. Their father was the only Major Sect Leader to not dislike Wen Ruohan. The Jin Sect was the only Major Sect not involved with the Yin Iron.

His half-brother could have taken this protection and left the others to flounder. Instead, his own nobility and lack of awareness of the danger he was in led to him being the one to continually speak up.

Jin Guangyao always thought his half-brother was arrogant, aloof, apathetic to everything beneath him. He thought the only redeeming quality about him was his wife.

Jiang Wanyin said Wei Wuxian was impressed by Jin Zixuan here. He was starting to be too.

**“Inform you?” Wen Chao tilted his head, “How many times do I have to say this before you remember it? Don’t get it wrong.” He turned around, “You...are nothing but my dogs. I am the one who gives commands. I don’t need you to tell me what to do.” Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian exchanged a glance, “I am the one who gives order, the one who deploys you.”**

**Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes and shook his head as Wen Chao continued, “Only I can repress the monster.” Wei Wuxian then turned his attention back to Lan Wangji, “What are you looking at? Hurry the hell up!”**

**Jiang Cheng grabbed Wei Wuxian before he could wander over the edge of a cliff.**

**“Yes,” Wen Chao grinned, “It’s here. Go! Get down there!”**

**“It seems bottomless,” Wei Wuxian replied, “And we don’t know what kind of monster is down there.” Wen Chao pushed through the crowd, “If you don’t clarify the situation, how can we get down there?” He shoved Wei Wuxian down at the end of his question.**

**The torch went flying as he flew off the edge.**

**“Wei Ying!” Lan Wangji shouted after him as everyone watched in horror.**

**“Aish,” Nie Huaisang muttered, “How many times did Wen Chao nearly kill Wei-xiong?”**

There was the Fairy Statue. Did that count as one since it was a distraction for the puppets or should the statue’s attack and then the puppets count as two separate instances of attempted murder? Then there was the takedown of the Dire Owl, where he was strangled, but did that count since it was part of Wei Wuxian’s plan?

The beast in the dungeon was definitely meant to kill him. Throwing him off the cliff as well.

Jiang Cheng flinched, and he immediately regretted his question.

Nie Huaisang couldn't think straight. Not with his brother glancing at him every few seconds like he was something he needed a strategy to approach. If he had a question, he should just ask. That was who Da-ge was. He wouldn't know subtlety if it slapped him across the face.

**Wei Wuxian rolled, and watched as ropes were lowered and everyone else followed. Lan Wangji reached him first and pulled him to his feet. Wei Wuxian chuckled, "You were kicked down too?"**

**"Shut up," Jiang Cheng snapped, "We were just worried that the monster ate you. It might bring shame to our Sect."**

**"Oh," Wei Wuxian nodded, then placed his hands on his hips, then spread them, "Setting these two aside, you can't be afraid that I was eaten up as well, can you?"**

**Jin Zixuan looked away, "I would rather come down to fight that monster than see that mean couple insult us."**

**MianMian nodded in agreement.**

**"I understand," Wei Wuxian said.**

**"Hey!" Wen Chao shouted down, "Anything unusual? Hey! Are you all dead already?"**

**With a few looks, they silently agreed to keep moving.**

Nie Mingjue snorted.

Oh, he was just as eager as anyone else to see a good fight, but knowing his brother had a plan for all this...it felt strange, to trust in him so much. Strange, but good. Huaisang knew what he was doing. He'd always known what he was doing.

He figured the target of this was the Jins. Probably Jin Guangshan considering the significant looks he sent Jin Zixuan and how much he still cared about Jin Guangyao.

Nie Mingjue knew how to wait for the best moment to strike. He spent over a decade waiting to take down Wen Ruohan. The question wasn't why his brother didn't tell him about Wei Wuxian's innocence. If Jin Guangshan was determined to make a criminal out of him, there was little point to striking when the iron was hot. If he wanted to save his friend, he needed to wait.

He still wasn't sure if this would take down Jin Guangshan, or why Huaisang felt he needed to do it now. Was it all for Wei Wuxian? Something greater?

Did Huaisang think Jin Guangshan would turn his schemes against the Nie Sect next?

His amusement at his brother's schemes melted away. Surely Jin Guangshan wouldn't dare...but those were words he'd heard too much in the past hour. They constantly warned Wen Chao against his course of action, and yet he dared.

Some people looked upon honor as others would stars in the sky. There was little an ambitious man wouldn't dare to do.

**It didn't take long to come to a lake in a cavern, Wen Chao's shouts fading in the background.**

**"Listen to the echo," Wei Wuxian noted, "We are hundreds of meters away from them."**

**"Something's wrong," Lan Wangji agreed.**

**Wei Wuxian drew a talisman in the air, then sent it out. It hovered above a rock in the lake.**

The Xuanwu.

Not that any of them realized it at the time. The greatest source of resentment most of them had ever seen before the Stygian Tiger Amulet, and they'd all assumed it was just a big rock.

**Wen Chao then caught up with them. Wang Lingjiao frowned, "Gongzi, it's a dead end."**

**"Impossible," Wen Chao declared, "Keep searching carefully." As his disciples dispersed, he turned to the few remaining, "You guys have somebody hung and bleeding to lure that thing out."**

**"Nonsense!" Jin Zixuan raised his voice, "Luring that thing with flesh and blood means leaving us to die!"**

**"What?" Wen Chao narrowed his eyes, "Jin-gongzi, do you want to try it yourself? To make an example for us?"**

**Jin Zixuan raised a hand, "You-"**

**"Gongzi," MianMian grabbed his other hand.**

**Wang Lingjiao stepped forward, "If I may say, how about her?"**

**MianMian's eyes widened.**

**"Her?" Wen Chao echoed, "Maybe another one."**

**"Why?" Wang Lingjiao complained, "You feel reluctant because she is pretty?"**

**"Nonsense," Wen Chao denied, "What am I reluctant about? It's your call."**

**Wang Lingjiao moved to have the Wen disciples seize her, but Lan Wangji quickly placed himself between them. Jiang Cheng shifted slightly in front of Wei Wuxian to stop him from joining him.**

**"Step aside!" A Wen disciple ordered.**

**“Don’t you understand the human language?” Wen Chao asked, “Or are you playing hero here?”**

**“Enough!” Jin Zixuan snapped, “You used us as your dogs. Now you want to use us as your bait.”**

**“It didn’t occur to me that Jin Zixuan could be that brave,” Wei Wuxian whispered to Jiang Cheng.**

Jiang Yanli bit back a smile.

“So he can have a good opinion of me,” Her husband muttered.

“A-Xian likes good people,” She chided gently.

A-Zuan flushed, “I know. I just...there’s not going to be another incident like this.”

True. A-Xian could forgive his previous insults when he saw how willing he was to protect his friend in a crisis. She didn’t want her husband rushing off to dangerous situations with her brothers just to get them to like him. Even if that was the quickest way to earn their respect.

“You just need to spend more time together,” She settled on saying, “When he sees how good you are with our son, he’ll forget about your...”

“Embarrassments?” He finished.

Jiang Yanli just smiled wider.

**“You want to rebel?” Wen Chao raised his whip, “I’m warning you, I’ve been putting up with you for too long. You better tie the girl up yourself here and now, or all of you people from whatever Sect won’t be able to return!”**

**No one moved, then two of the Jin disciples tried to grab MianMian. Lan Wangji forced once back with his torch while Jin Zixuan hit the other, “It’s such a shame that disciples like you are from the Jin Sect. How disgraceful!”**

**“Judging from the situation, we might not be able to stay out of this,” Wei Wuxian commented again in a whisper to his brother.**

**“Rebels,” Wen Chao sneered, “You rebels. Attack!”**

So Wei Wuxian hadn’t led the rebellion.

Some suspected as much, but many were still surprised. After all, it was the justification for the Wen Sect’s attack on Lotus Pier. Wei Wuxian and the Jiang Sect led the rebellion against Wen Chao at Indoctrination. Wen Chao returned the insult by attacking their home.

Yet he was doing his best there to be neutral. To just observe, and let others face what trouble they found.

It was Jin Zixuan and Hanguang-Jun who started the fight. All to protect an innocent from being strung up.

“How did they survive at all?” Someone asked.

The odds were against them. They were outnumbered and weaponless. Their best fighters were injured. Hanguang-Jun’s leg was still broken. Wei Wuxian was mauled by a beast and thrown off a cliff. There was no reason for Wen Chao to choose to retreat and trap them in the cave with the Xuanwu.

The Xuanwu that had yet to appear.

**A fight broke out. Lan Wangji used his torch. Jin Zixuan relied on his fists. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng both disarmed the first disciple to come at them then cut them down with their own blades. Jin Zixuan quickly disarmed another to protect MianMian. Then Lan Wangji got himself a sword once he lost his torch.**

**Wen Qing backed away to watch the fight.**

**Wen Chao watched angrily, “You dare disobey me? You shall all be executed.”**

**Wei Wuxian slashed one disciple before slicing the neck open on another. He turned to face Wen Chao, “You’re right. Those who count on their Sects and do evil at will,” He pointed the sword at him, “Shall all be executed.”**

**“What did you say?” Wen Chao’s face scrunched.**

**Wei Wuxian lowered his blade and stepped forward. Wen Chao took a step forward to meet him. Wei Wuxian tilted his head, “You want me to repeat it?” Lan Wangji glanced at him, “I’ll repeat it then. Those who count on their Sects and do evil at will shall all be executed. Not only executed but also decapitated and reviled by the people to warn future generations.”**

**Wei Wuxian grinned, “Do you get it?”**

**Wen Chao raised his whip, “How dare you say such outrageous bullshit!”**

Lan Qiren closed his eyes.

He couldn’t deny a small amount of gratitude swelling in his heart. Wei Wuxian offered to carry his nephew with his broken leg, even when carrying him could have landed him with a worse punishment than the dungeon. He convinced Wen Qing to give them a break for his nephew. He even found this cursed cave so Wangji wouldn’t have to keep searching.

Now this. Someone had to attack Wen Chao, otherwise they stood no chance at surviving.

Attacking Wen Chao directly meant facing Wen Zhuliu. Fighting the Core-Melting Hand without a weapon, or a weapon they were unfamiliar with, was asking to have their core destroyed. It was suicide.



But Wei Wuxian was Wei Wuxian. His methods were obscure. He approached Wen Chao with his sword lowered, depending on his sharp words. Everything about his posture and tone was provocative.

No one could attack Wen Chao, not with Wen Zhuliu there.

Only Wei Wuxian could get Wen Chao to attack him.

This wasn't a question of cultivation, but of intelligence and personality.

**Wen Zhuliu frowned and shook his head silently as Wei Wuxian began to laugh.**

**“What?” Wei Wuxian continued to laugh loudly, “Outrageous? Bullshit? Aren't you talking about yourself? Wen Chao. Didn't you know who said that sentence? That's clearly written in your Sect's *The Quintessence of the Wen Sect*. That was said by your ancestor, the great, great, great gentry Wen Mao.”**

**“You shouldn't have called your ancestor's words outrageous bullshit,” Wei Wuxian started clapping, moving away slightly, “Bravo! Excellent! Brilliant!” The fighting still continued on the other side of the cavern, “Oh wait. What's the crime of insulting the Wen Sect's gentries? If I'm right, it should be outright execution, right?”**

**He giggled, “Right?” He looked from Wen Qing to Wen Zhuliu, “Very well.” His smile faded abruptly, “You can die now.”**

**“Wei Wuxian!” Wen Chao was infuriated into attacking.**

**Wen Zhuliu moved to join the attack, but Jiang Cheng forced him back.**

**Wei Wuxian easily subdued Wen Chao and held his sword to his throat, “Stop there!” He demanded.**

**Slowly, the fighting stopped.**

“You all would have died if not for Wei Wuxian,” Zewu-Jun said.

“I know,” Jin Zixuan bit out, “Fighting was short-sighted, but it was our only option.”

It wasn't.

Su She rolled his eyes. It was the only noble option, but it was by no means their only option. They wanted to string up the girl. They wanted her to bleed.

Corpses didn't bleed.

They should have strung her up themselves. That way, they could have controlled the injury, made it something that would bleed, but wouldn't be fatal to someone with a strong enough golden core. If they really wanted to be noble they could have offered to bleed themselves. It wasn't like Hanguang-Jun and Wei Wuxian weren't already injured.

Instead, nearly half the group was slaughtered in a fight that started to protect one person.

He wanted to ask if it was worth it, but all they'd do was dismiss him as a coward.

**“Don't move or I'll spill some of your Gongzi's blood,” Wei Wuxian threatened.**

**“Stop!” Wang Lingjiao shouted, “Wei Wuxian! Release him!”**

**“Don't move!” Wen Chao ordered, “Listen to Wei-gongzi.”**

**“Wei Wuxian,” Wen Qing warned, “Don't act rashly.” Then she looked to the other disciples, “Everybody, put down your weapons.” At Wen Chao's fearful nodding, they obeyed.**

**“Core-Melting Hand,” Wei Wuxian noticed, “Don't move now! You should be familiar with your Zongzhu. Your Gongzi is at my mercy. If he bleeds even one drop, everyone here, including you, won't get away with this.”**

**Wen Zhuliu sheathed his blade.**

**Abruptly, the earth began to move beneath Wei Wuxian's feet, “Jiang Cheng!” He called out, “It's an earthquake!”**

**Jiang Cheng looked down, “No.”**

**“You actually checked?” Nie Huaisang asked as others around the room laughed.**

**Jiang Wanyin blushed, “Wouldn't you?”**

**“Hm...” Nie Huaisang tilted his head, “If Da-ge told me, maybe.”**

Lan Wangji watched as Nie Mingjue took a drink to hide his smile. He and Xichen weren't like that. Then again, their Sect forbade lying. There was never a time where Xichen told him something obviously untrue with the expectation of an immediate response.

And they never really tried to convince each other about truths they didn't have evidence for.

Lan Wangji never truly tried to get Xichen to see Wei Ying the way he did.

Xichen never tried to get him to treat Chifeng-Zun and Lianfeng-Zun like brothers. He didn't call them Da-ge or San-ge like Nie Huaisang did.

**They watched as what they'd thought was a rock began to move more. Jiang Cheng continued, “It's not an earthquake! There's something beneath you!”**

**Suddenly, the massive head of the Xuanwu emerged. It looked at the people on the shore. Wei Wuxian quickly covered Wen Chao's mouth. The Xuanwu's beady eyes opened.**

**“Quiet,” Lan Wangji cautioned, “Its vision is bad. If we don’t make a sound, it won’t attack us.”**

**The Xuanwu turned to examine the disturbance on its shell. Wei Wuxian struggled to keep Wen Chao silent, but ultimately failed when he broke free, “Save me! Wen Zhuliu!”**

**Wei Wuxian kicked the shouting man away, then threw his sword to distract the Xuanwu.**

**Wen Zhuliu and Wang Lingjiao dragged Wen Chao away.**

**Wei Wuxian concerned himself with the Xuanwu, “Stop pestering us,” He growled, tracing another talisman into existence. It screamed when it hit, then darted forward to grab one of the Wen archers. It tossed the body into others.**

It was one thing to hear stories about the Xuanwu.

It was another to see it. The massive shell, so large they’d mistaken it for an island. Its neck long enough to reach them on the shore. Its jaw powerful enough to pick up a grown man.

The Xuanwu of Slaughter lived up to its reputation. It was terrifying, and to see how easily it killed...

“How did Hanguang-Jun and Wei Wuxian kill that?”

**“Be careful,” Jin Zixuan warned MianMian, before running forward to attack.**

**“Jin-gongzi, be careful!” She shouted back.**

**Jin Zixuan was forced backwards, only to be replaced by Jiang Cheng, who was then assisted by Lan Wangji.**

**Wei Wuxian leaned down to pick up a bow and arrows from a corpse. As he took aim, he was distracted by a cry for help. He turned, and with barely a thought, shot down two Wen Sect disciples who were holding MianMian still to be branded. Though her arm was cut, it didn’t stop Wang Lingjiao from throwing the brand.**

**Wei Wuxian threw his bow at her as he dove between her and the brand, taking it to the chest.**

“Vindictive bitch,” Sect Leader Nie cursed under his breath.

MianMian managed a small smile. She knew she should have put up more of a fight, but she’d still been shaken from her fellow disciple’s betrayal. It would have been one thing if the Jiang disciples or the Nie ones tried to grab her. They didn’t know her. They didn’t train with her.

It made her hand tremble just to remember their betrayal. She wondered if she would have left the Jin Sect anyways once the Sunshot Campaign was over.

She never truly belonged there.

“You are too good for the Jin Sect,” Nie Huaisang muttered.

“I still...” She trailed off, hating the way her voice trembled, “Wei Wuxian was hurt because I was weak.”

Sect Leader Nie scoffed, “You were betrayed. You’re allowed to be distracted.”

MianMian remembered Lianfeng-Zun’s betrayal. How it left the Nie Sect Leader so stunned he almost got stabbed by Wen Zhuliu. Lianfeng-Zun threw himself in front of that attack the same way Wei Wuxian had.

**Wang Lingjiao was dragged away, and Wei Wuxian returned to fighting the Xuanwu. Wen Qing hurried after them.**

**Jiang Cheng followed to engage Wen Zhuliu in another fight.**

**As they climbed to safety, Wen Qing turned back.**

**“Everyone, attack,” Jin Zixuan commanded.**

**“Hurry up,” Wen Qing was dragged up by Wen Chao, “Is everyone here? Cut the ropes!”**

**Wen Qing shouted, but was pulled back before she could stop them, “No!”**

She tried.

That was all Jiang Cheng cared about. He didn’t expect her to magically be able to stop Wen Chao, but she protested.

It was more than he expected.

Probably because it was more than he ever did for her in return.

**“Lan Zhan! Jiang Cheng!” Wei Wuxian ordered, “Fall back! Go back to the entrance!” He fired arrows as they obeyed, “Quick!”**

**Jin Zixuan bent down to pick up one of the cut ropes, “Shameless bastards. They cut all the ropes.” He threw them to the ground.**

**“The Wen Sect did this?” MianMian asked.**

**Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji looked at each other.**

**“Who else could it be?” Jin Zixuan thundered.**

**“Without our swords, what can we do?” Another disciple worried.**

Were they really so dependent on their swords?

Yes.

Swords were traditional. They were the tool of every spiritual cultivator. It was natural to depend on them, and since they should never be separated from them, there was no need to stress combat without them.

But there was a low murmur amongst the cultivators in the room.

Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun defeated that monster without their swords. Hundreds of cultivators failed, but those two succeeded.

Was it because they were both adept at other areas of cultivation? Wei Wuxian was a master of talismans. Hanguang-Jun had a whole spectrum of techniques for musical cultivation. Both were acceptable, but not widely practiced. Even within the Lan Sect.

**At the entrance to the cave, Wen Qing fought against some disciples holding her, “Stop! Don’t!” She watched as the Wen disciples blocked the opening, trapping everyone else within, “Stop that! Stop!”**

**“Hurry it up!” Wen Chao ordered, “You helpless trash!”**

**“Stop!” Wen Qing pleaded, “They will die!”**

**Wen Chao turned towards her, “It’s okay if they die.”**

**“Wen Chao,” She searched his expression, “This will make it difficult for your father to face the other Sects.”**

**“Don’t intimidate me with my father,” Wen Chao snapped, “The other Sects are nothing. They are bound to be wiped out by us sooner or later. We’ll just make up an excuse when we get back. We’ll just say they had an accident in the night hunt. Who can do anything to me?”**

**Wen Qing fought back tears as Wen Chao ordered them to leave. She didn’t move until Wen Zhuliu dragged her away.**

If she could have done something, she would have.

She’d done all she could for them, but her brother wasn’t with her. She couldn’t leave without him.

**“That mean couple!” Jiang Cheng shouted, “How could they?!”**

**“It’s alright if we can’t get out,” A Yao disciple said, “My parents will come find me. If they hear about this, they will definitely find this place.”**

**“They must be assuming we are still in Qishan,” Another argued, “How can they find us here?” He paused, “What’s more, when the Wen Sect returns, they will not tell the truth.” Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji once again looked at each other, “They will make up some excuse. We are trapped in the cave now.”**

**The first disciple spoke again, “So we are trapped in the cave without food and accompanied by a monster.”**

Dark circumstances, surely, but the only two who truly ended up without food and trapped with a monster were A-Xian and Hanguang-Jun.

Jiang Yanli held her husband’s hand as he grimaced. She didn’t understand what all their obsessions were with keeping score. It wasn’t like A-Xian would ever hold that over his head. It wasn’t like he expected gratitude for being a hero. That wasn’t why he did what he did.

It just never occurred to A-Xian to not help someone in need. He couldn’t stand by and watch the undeserving suffer.

He made a vow to live with no regrets. He didn’t want to look back and wonder what if he’d done something different, sooner, better. So he gave his all in every encounter.

A-Xuan didn’t like being in anyone’s debt, but she couldn’t figure out how to explain that there was no debt.

**Wei Wuxian brought a hand up to his brand, then smiled, “Jiang Cheng!” He ran up to his brother and wrapped an arm around him, “Jiang Cheng! Do you want meat? I have cooked meat here. You want some?”**

**“Get lost!” Jiang Cheng snapped, “Wasn’t the hot iron enough? Look at the situation!” Wei Wuxian made a face, then looked away, “I really want to stitch your mouth shut.”**

**MianMian fell to her knees, “I’m sorry,” She started crying, “I’m sorry.”**

**Wei Wuxian knelt next to her, “MianMian, don’t cry! I’m the one who got burned, not you. It hurts so much. Can you say something to soothe me?”**

**MianMian just continued to cry.**

**“Jiang Cheng, can’t you say something to comfort her?” Wei Wuxian demanded.**

**“I didn’t make her cry,” Jiang Cheng protested.**

**“Don’t cry,” Wei Wuxian soothed.**

**Lan Wangji turned away and started back towards the monster.**

**“Is he jealous?” Huaisang asked.**

Lady Luo managed a shaky laugh. Some in the Nie Sect laughed with her.

Seeing those who didn’t survive their rebellion and the Xuanwu’s initial attack was sobering. This should have been the start of the Sunshot Campaign. The deaths of their disciples here should have been enough for all of them to realize no one was safe under Wen Ruohan’s tyranny. Yet it took the loss of the Jiang Sect for anyone to take real action.

Nie Mingjue knew that a lack of response didn't mean a lack of care. He could see it in Jin Zixuan's eyes, the way Lady Luo looked almost as upset as her past self.

He admired her sense of duty. If his Sect had betrayed him, if only one person from his Sect stood in his defense, he wouldn't have stayed even if there was a war to fight. He bit back the offer for her to join the Nie Sect. This wasn't the right time.

Nie Mingjue, however, could glare at anyone who looked at her and thought there was still something between her and Wei Wuxian. The same men who dismissed her in this very hall over a year ago.

"Don't joke," Wangji replied, and the attention went to him because he actually deigned to comment.

Nie Mingjue held in another snort. Maybe he was jealous.

**Jiang Cheng noticed, "Eh? Lan-er-gongzi. Where are you going? That monster is still guarding the black pond."**

**"I'm going back to the pond," Lan Wangji answered, "There's a way out."**

**That drew Wei Wuxian's attention, and he darted away from the crying young woman towards his friend, "What way out?"**

**Lan Wangji met his gaze, "Maple leaves."**

**Wei Wuxian's eyes widened, "Right. There are maple leaves in the pond, but not in the cave. That means there is an exit at the bottom of the pond which connects to the water outside. So the maple leaves were carried inside through that."**

**"Eh?" Jiang Cheng frowned, "But how can we know how big the hole is? Is it possible to get through? What if it's small or just a crack?"**

**"Plus, that monster is still guarding it, and it won't leave," Jin Zixuan added.**

**"But we should still take action since there's a chance," Wei Wuxian insisted, "It's much better than sitting here and waiting for our parents. We can just lure it away if it's still there." He hissed as his injury flared up.**

**They silently made their way back to the pond.**

It was funny how Wei Wuxian took the lead here.

And he did it so naturally. Jin Zixuan and Jiang Wanyin both held doubts about going back to the cave, but because Wei Wuxian said so, they went back. It wasn't like Wangji would make an argument.

Though it wasn't as if Wei Wuxian would have let Wangji go alone.

"Well observed, Wangji," Their uncle commented.

Lan Xichen nodded in agreement. Wangji and Wei Wuxian were the reason some disciples made it out of there.

He prepared himself to watch them get left behind. He understood there was no other choice, but he had a feeling there was.

**Wei Wuxian reached out and grabbed a torch, then threw it further away. The Xuanwu hissed and came closer to the flame. Wei Wuxian nodded to Jiang Cheng, who snuck past it while it was distracted. As silently as possible, he waded into the water, then started swimming to examine the bottom.**

**The Xuanwu didn't seem to notice, its attention still on the torch.**

**Jiang Cheng resurfaced, and the sound of his inhale drew the Xuanwu towards him. Wei Wuxian bit his finger and drew another talisman in his blood, lighting a larger fire and getting the monster focused on him again.**

**"There is a hole!" Jiang Cheng reported, "It's big!"**

**"How big?" Wei Wuxian asked, rising from his fire.**

**"It can fit five or six people at a time," Jiang Cheng answered.**

"Thank heavens for the Jiang Sect's swimming ability."

Jiang Cheng ignored the glances sent towards him. Yes, he found the second exit, but it didn't mean anything to him since Wei Wuxian never made it through it. Getting everyone else out was a much less heroic achievement compared to his brother.

Yet this was probably what Wei Wuxian planned all along.

If Jiang Cheng was the one leading the others through the exit, then he also needed to go through the exit. Whereas the distraction took on the risk of being left behind or taken down.

On every level, they were unequal. Just not in the way he'd thought.

**Wei Wuxian glanced at the Xuanwu, then turned back to the group, "Everyone, listen up! Follow Jiang Cheng to get through the hole! Those who are healthy, carry the injured. Those who can swim, carry those who can't. Five or six people at a time. Don't rush it! Now! Duck!"**

**The fire went out, forcing Wei Wuxian to dodge and divert more energy into restarting it.**

**"Quickly!" Jiang Cheng ushered them towards escape. Wei Wuxian continued to focus on his fire, "Come here!" His younger brother ordered.**

**"I'll be right behind you!" Wei Wuxian promised.**

**Jiang Cheng grimaced, but was forced to lead the others into the water.**



**MianMian slipped and cut her hand on a rock. With blood in the water, the Xuanwu became harder to distract. Lan Wangji threw a talisman of his own, then darted forward to pull a tired Wei Wuxian back. The rescue left him vulnerable, and as he dodged the Xuanwu's next attack, his injured leg got bitten.**

**Roused by Lan Wangji's injury, Wei Wuxian got up to help him.**

“You went back for him,” Jin Guangyao shouldn't be surprised, but he was.

It didn't surprise him Wei Wuxian was willing to sacrifice himself so others could escape. He was raised to protect Jiang Wanyin, and protect Jiang Wanyin he did.

It did surprise him that Hanguang-Jun went back for Wei Wuxian.

“Of course,” Hanguang-Jun replied, as though he had no other option.

As though he couldn't have escaped with everyone else if he just left Wei Wuxian to die. Er-ge's attention was back on him, but Jin Guangyao didn't want to hear it. Hanguang-Jun loved Wei Wuxian, and his love lasted even when it hurt him. Even when it left him with worse injuries, trapped in a cave with a monster.

For some reason, he thought their love would be unequal. That love was inherently unequal.

Like him and Er-ge. Wei Wuxian would do terrible things to protect Hanguang-Jun, just like he did for Er-ge during the war. The biggest difference was that Wei Wuxian couldn't hide his terrible deeds. His demonic cultivation was known to all, while his actions were...overlooked, forgotten.

Would Er-ge make sacrifices for him if he needed it?

**Meanwhile, Jin Zixuan struggled to get Jiang Cheng into the water, “We have to go.”**

**“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng shouted, “Look out!”**

**Wei Wuxian retreated with Lan Wangji.**

**“Let's go!” Jin Zixuan pulled at Jiang Cheng.**

**“Jiang Cheng!” Wei Wuxian shouted, “Find somebody to rescue us!” He led the Xuanwu away.**

**“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng shouted miserably, “I'll be back!”**

**“Let's go!” Jin Zixuan finally succeeded in pulling him into the water.**

**Wei Wuxian dragged Lan Wangji through a small entrance. The Xuanwu couldn't get at them through the stones, though it tried.**

**After a few minutes, it gave up. Wei Wuxian darted out to check, and watched it slink back into the water.**

Just like that, Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun were trapped with a monster of legend.

Wei Wuxian was exhausted from his continued use of spiritual power and the injuries he sustained. Hanguang-Jun was also injured, the red seeping into the white of his pant leg in the memory. They didn't have any supplies. They didn't have any real weapons.

“How did they survive?”

## Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I've transcribed everything up to WWX being thrown in the Burial Mounds. I don't think I'm going to write my own take on what happened there, but I'd love to hear what you guys think! Similarly with how you would describe demonic cultivation!

But mostly, I'm curious when y'all think WWX made the Stygian Tiger Amulet? When he was in the Burial Mounds? Later? CQL never really says.

Thank you all for your wonderful comments! I can't believe we're over 1,000 subscribers! (Even though I'm the only one that can see that)

# Wangxian in a Cave Part 2

## Chapter Summary

This time featuring Wangxian (the song)

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“So...” Nie Huaisang shifted in his seat, “Last time Wei-xiong and Hanguang-Jun were alone in a cave together they got married.”

Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes at the devious young man. Nie Huaisang had always been on the periphery of his life. He’d never given him reason to focus on him before. Even now, having confirmed that he was more than he appeared to be...it didn’t bother him. Nie Huaisang still loved his brother, and Nie Mingjue would always be an honorable man.

“Not married,” Uncle corrected, his voice tight.

“Engaged then,” Nie Huaisang fluttered his fan, likely hiding a mischievous grin, “Are you telling me you spent a week in a cave together and nothing happened?”

Lan Wangji recognized the provocation, but he couldn’t stop himself from blushing. He had debated with himself for hours how much of his time with Wei Ying he would show. He eventually decided he should stake a public claim on him. Let everyone in this room know just how dedicated he was to the love of his life.

They might not understand it yet. They might still think he hardened his heart when Wei Ying turned to demonic cultivation, but they would see soon that Wei Ying really didn’t change much.

They would never respect a demonic cultivator, but they did respect him. Their fear of the Yiling Patriarch would one day lead them to action. Their fear of Hanguang-Jun...perhaps that would be enough.

He'd make it enough.

Xichen choked on his tea, “Something happened?”

“You were both injured,” Jiang Wanyin frowned.

Jin Zixuan flushed, “I thought Lans were romantic.”

“Oh, it doesn’t have to be romantic, Jin-xiong,” Nie Huaisang fanned himself, “Wei-xiong wouldn’t want to die a virgin.”

“Huaisang,” Nie Mingjue warned.

“Virgin?” Lan Wangji echoed, unsure if he wanted to know the answer or was jealous that Nie Huaisang would know this answer.

“You really need to work on your jealousy,” Nie Huaisang laughed, “What? We can share porn but not our own experiences?”

“Experiences,” Lan Wangji repeated again. He knew it was likely a joke, that Nie Huaisang was using this conversation to ease the tension in the room or some other reason he didn’t care for. They were on the same side so long as Wei Ying wasn’t disposable to him.

“Relax, Wangji-xiong,” Nie Huaisang lowered his fan to show his grin, “Wei-xiong’s never even kissed anyone. He’s all talk.”

Lan Wangji barely stopped his mouth from twitching into a pleased smile.

His brother just kept coughing. Jin Guangyao patted his back, “You don’t have to look so pleased with that.”

He wouldn’t love Wei Ying less if he wasn’t his first, but he couldn’t deny how satisfying it would be to be each other’s one and only.

**Wei Wuxian went back to Lan Wangji, “Lan Zhan. It’s fine now. That monster seems to have been sealed in the bottom somehow.” He glanced around, “Wait here.”**

**Wei Wuxian ran off to retrieve wood. He quickly stripped it so he could splint Lan Wangji’s leg, “Ay, do you have a rope or something?” He asked, his gaze darting immediately to the forehead ribbon, “That ribbon you have.” He snatched it.**

**“You!” Lan Wangji warned.**

**“Aiyah, what is it?” Wei Wuxian asked, tying the splint in place, “At such a critical time, you shouldn’t care too much. Can it be more important than your injured leg? Hold it.”**

“Or he didn’t care because Wei-xiong has a right to touch it,” Nie Huaisang snickered.

MianMian laughed, as did some of the members of his Sect. There were so many tragedies, but if they focused too much on the negatives it would only hurt the Wen Remnant’s chances of looking innocent.

Nie Huaisang might also be a little too invested. Everyone else in his life was too focused on their cultivation, or politics, to ever have romantic intrigues like this.

Having Wei Wuxian marry Hanguang-Jun was a plan with potential. Gusu was unparalleled in its serenity. As far as places and people who could be entrusted with Wei Wuxian’s

recovery, it was the only place there wouldn't be any muttering about. Even if Hanguang-Jun was infatuated with the demonic cultivator, there was Lan Qiren and Er-ge.

His gaze flickered to Jiang Yanli, who was smiling at the lack of argument Hanguang-Jun had to his ribbon being stolen.

Would Wei Wuxian be happy with a new husband, if it meant he couldn't see his family as much?

It would be so easy to convince Jin Zixuan that his wife was safer at Lotus Pier while he looked into his father's misdeeds. It would be a turbulent transition of power, since even Nie Huaisang wasn't sure who was in on what crimes. Having a vulnerable heir and vulnerable wife was just asking for a tragedy when Jin Zixuan started taking action.

With both his siblings, and his nephew, at their home, why would Wei Wuxian go to Gusu?

Unless Er-ge could be convinced to let Hanguang-Jun join the Jiang Sect?

**Wei Wuxian finished the wrap, "Hold it." He leaned back, watching as Lan Wangji trembled with pain. He then moved his hands to his torso, "I almost forgot about this after all that mess."**

**Wei Wuxian pulled out the pouch of herbs Wen Ning had given him, but was disappointed to see that some had been dislodged in the fight, "Only a little left? This is what Wen Ning gave me. How can it be? I deliberately saved it for..." He trailed off and sighed, "Nevermind. It's better than nothing."**

**"Here. Lan Zhan." He removed some of the herbs, but hesitated before applying them.**

Jiang Cheng tensed, recognizing his scheming face.

There was too much emotional whiplash, but he knew his brother. Outside of the war, he got more ridiculous the more serious a situation was. His antics only increased because of the lack of reaction Lan Wangji usually gave him.

Something happened between them here.

Something that made Lan Wangji nearly as desperate as him to find Wei Wuxian after he disappeared.

Was it a confession? There was no other reason for Lan Wangji to be in there except his love for Wei Wuxian. With Zewu-Jun missing and Lan Qiren injured, Lan Wangji was the acting Lan Sect Leader. His priority should have been getting back to Gusu, making sure the Lan Sect knew the Lan Clan would live on.

He'd never thought about it like that, how Lan Wangji might be devoted enough to Wei Wuxian to go against his Sect. Maybe because he still sat there in pristine white robes while his brother squandered his life away in the Burial Mounds.

What right did he have to judge him? He too sat here in robes more expensive than any amount of money they had in the Burial Mounds. Why didn't he cast everything away for Wen Qing?

Because he couldn't. He'd lost his Sect once and he dared not risk it again. Not for Wen Qing. Not even for Wei Wuxian.

Back then, if it hadn't been for Jin Zixuan and Wei Wuxian's shout to get help, he would have stayed with them to fight the monster. Now, as Sect Leader...

Jiang Cheng grimaced. They were different people under different circumstances. So what if Lan Wangji confessed here? It obviously wasn't enough for Wei Wuxian to understand his intentions.

**Wei Wuxian closed the pouch and rose, "Come on. Take it off." He started undoing his belt.**

**"Take what off?" Lan Wangji asked.**

**"What else?" Wei Wuxian retorted, "Take your clothes off." He removed his belt, then started on arm bands, "You're drenched from that pond. Don't you feel uncomfortable wearing wet clothes?" Lan Wangji scooted back a step, "Take them off. I'll dry them for you." He removed his outer robe, "Take them off."**

It wasn't an unreasonable request.

Strangely worded and oddly enthusiastic, but they were injured and remaining in their wet clothes wasn't going to help them.

Still, the thought crossed many minds that Hanguang-Jun's silence was truly out of embarrassment.

Would this finally reveal Wei Wuxian's true feelings?

**Wei Wuxian stood in his red inner robe, "You can't do it?" He knelt down and reached out for Lan Wangji, "I'll help you."**

**"Wei Ying!!" Lan Wangji shoved his hands off his chest, "What are you doing?"**

**Wei Wuxian laughed, "What am I doing? Taking your clothes off."**

**Lan Wangji shoved him away again, either terrified or nervous.**

**Wei Wuxian sat back, "You don't want to take them off?" He nodded, "Okay. I'll take mine off."**

**"Shameless!"**

Jin Zixuan was horrified by Wei Wuxian's audacity, even though the color of the device clearly indicated this was also Hanguang-Jun's memories as well. His wife was giggling,

likely because she knew more than him. They obviously wouldn't have sex in the cave.

Right? They were injured. They hadn't told each other how they felt. Hanguang-Jun was a Lan, and technically married or not there had to be a rule somewhere in there about improper conduct.

So they couldn't have sex.

Even if Hanguang-Jun was being weirdly possessive and got jealous at just about anyone who had Wei Wuxian's attention that wasn't him.

**As he pulled up his inner robe, Lan Wangji turned away and spat blood.**

**Wei Wuxian quickly bent down to press on an acupoint, "Okay. There." He whispered, "It's much better with the stale blood gone. Don't you feel much better now?"**

**Lan Wangji stared at him, blood still on his lips, and almost looked disappointed when he said, "Thank you."**

"I'm going to kill him," Jiang Wanyin muttered.

Nie Mingjue laughed. Wei Wuxian wasn't that type of person, potentially in love or not. And it was one of the easiest ways to rile up a Lan. Xichen only dealt with all the flirting people did with him by ignoring their intentions and replying to flattery with flattery. He was never interested in anyone like that.

So he laughed at Wangji's disappointment after having his hopes raised.

"He should have just gone with it," Huaisang muttered.

"Huaisang," He half-heartedly scolded.

"I'm just saying," His little brother sighed, "Wei-xiong's so observant, but he can be a little oblivious when it comes to romance."

"And you know that...how?" Lady Luo teased, her gaze flickering to Wangji.

Someone really needed to work on his jealousy problem.

**"Don't mention it," Wei Wuxian looked away, "I am afraid of others' thanks, especially your formal kind. It gives me goosebumps." He smiled, then started a fire and went back to applying herbs to the wound. Lan Wangji flinched and grimaced in pain, "Hold on," Wei Wuxian comforted.**

**Lan Wangji grabbed his wrist, and he stopped, "What is it? Does it hurt? Just hang in there."**

**Lan Wangji grabbed some of the herbs, and moved to press them against his burnt skin. Wei Wuxian cringed, "That hurts, Lan Zhan."**

**“You are welcome,” Lan Wangji replied.**

**Wei Wuxian laughed, then settled against the wall, their shoulders brushing, “Lan Zhan. You can make fun of me now.” He laid his outer robe by the fire, “Actually, I used to get many injuries. Every time I got injured, I would swim. There’s only a few of the grass left for blood condensation. I think your wound needs it more.”**

“He got hurt a lot, didn’t he?” Lan Xichen wondered.

“A-Niang held him responsible for anything the disciples did wrong,” Jiang Yanli said, her smile becoming sad, “Since he’s Head Disciple...”

How strange. Wangji was their Head Disciple and Head of Discipline. Their disciples’ actions weren’t a reflection of him, rather, his to reflect on. A Head Disciple was supposed to be an example to the others, especially the juniors.

“Though his methods have also gotten him hurt,” She continued, “As you’ve seen, he can be quite reckless with himself.”

As long as it accomplished his goal.

Maybe that was why he stuck with demonic cultivation. He didn’t care what happened to himself as long as he protected those he felt he needed to. Even if the damage was permanent.

**“Since you’re aware of the pain, don’t be rash next time,” Lan Wangji scolded.**

**“You think I wanted to get hurt?” Wei Wuxian demanded, “I had no choice. Who knew Wang Lingjiao was such a venomous woman? MianMian...” He chuckled, “Is fairly pretty. What if she got some permanent marks on her face from that hot iron?”**

**“You can’t get rid of the mark on your body for the rest of your life,” Lan Wangji replied.**

**“That’s different,” Wei Wuxian dismissed, “It’s not on my face anyway. I’m a man. A man should get wounded sometimes and get some scars. What’s more, even if the mark will be with me forever, it represents that I once protected a girl who will never forget me her entire life. Just think about it. It’s quite beautiful.” He grinned, “Right?”**

**Lan Wangji’s expression hardened, “So you know that she’ll remember you forever?”**

**Wei Wuxian’s smile fell, “Why are you mad?”**

So even Wei Wuxian picked up on Wangji’s jealousy.

Lan Qiren pinched the bridge of his nose. It wasn’t like he didn’t see it coming. To Wangji, Wei Wuxian was his one great love. If Wei Wuxian used the smallest amount of his genius, he would see the signs of Wangji’s intentions. Wangji told him what the forehead ribbon meant, and still he seemed oblivious to what his touch meant.



Was it really as Lianfeng-Zun said? Did he not think he was worthy of Wangji's love?

He wasn't, but that was neither here nor there. Xichen would support his brother in all things, just as Lan Qiren had supported his own. If it meant bringing Wei Wuxian to Gusu for the protection of the cultivation world and his own good, so be it.

He would rather have Wei Wuxian there as Wangji's husband, therefore his problem, rather than as a guest/prisoner. As Wangji's husband, he was less likely to try to escape.

But if he couldn't recognize Wangji's intentions...it was another barrier in an already difficult situation.

**Lan Wangji looked away, slightly flustered, "If you don't mean it, you shouldn't flirt with anyone."**

**Wei Wuxian looked away as well, muttering, "I didn't flirt with you anyway." He paused, then turned back with a teasing lilt to his voice, "I see..."**

**"You see what?" Lan Wangji faced him, their faces inches apart.**

"Oh my..." Nie Huaisang trailed off, his eyes widening.

Jiang Yanli watched intently. Did A-Xian actually realize why Hanguang-Jun was angry? Were they going to be the first couple to go through a confession?

If so...had too much happened too quickly? Had they gone from this to fighting the Xuanwu, then the attack on Lotus Pier and his disappearance, then the war? Was this why he wanted to go find Hanguang-Jun when everything seemed lost? Because he knew he would find support there, hope, love, recovery?

Her breath caught, thinking of his question after the war was over. Was he too busy to think of love until then?

**"I see that you like MianMian," Wei Wuxian decided.**

**Lan Wangji just stared at him in disbelief.**

**Taking that as confirmation, Wei Wuxian nodded, "Ah, so you are fond of her?"**

**Lan Wangji just kept staring at him.**

**Wei Wuxian laughed and nudged him, continuing to dry his robe.**

Jin Guangyao let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding as people around the room laughed.

"He's so smart," Er-ge shook his head, "How can he not realize?"

Jin Guangyao glanced at him, "It feels impossible."

He meant to add to him. It was obvious to everyone but Wei Wuxian, because to Wei Wuxian having Hanguang-Jun was impossible. Attempting the impossible only applied to Hanguang-Jun in attaining his respect, his friendship. His heart...that was unattainable to someone like him. Someone of inferior birth, who would never get the permission of the wife of his Sect's Leader.

"A-Yao," Er-ge said, the one word insisting.

"I'm trying," Jin Guanyao promised. He was trying to reframe his worldview where Er-ge loved him while knowing some of his darker side. He wouldn't fully believe it unless all the truth came out and Er-ge's feelings remained unchanged.

He contemplated taking that risk.

He still wanted his father to love him, to accept him, and to do that, he needed to keep his silence on their actions. But that only worked if love was something that could be earned. If it wasn't...did his father deserve his loyalty?

Was everything for nothing? All his lying, scheming, murdering...was it for an empty dream?

**"Why should I talk about these meaningless things with you here?" Lan Wangji asked.**

**"You have no choice," Wei Wuxian answered, "It's only you and me in this crappy place. We're two unlucky guys. If you don't want to talk to me, then who will you talk to?" He grinned slightly, "Speaking of which would be better...Lan Zhan, that was our longest conversation ever. After all we've been through, you still don't talk that much."**

**He turned back to face him, "Are all the Lan Sect members..." He cut himself off, then hit his own mouth as Lan Wangji looked more pained, "Lan Zhan. Are you hungry? Have you ever used inedia? If we don't eat or drink, we should still be fine for another three to four days. But after that, if there's still no one to help us, I suppose our stamina, energy, and spiritual power will be depleted then."**

**Wei Wuxian picked up a stick and began tracing, "The distance between Gusu and Muxi Mountain is shorter than that between Yunmeng and Muxi Mountain. Your Sect will probably arrive first." He continued tracing, "Let's be patient. And don't worry, even if your Sect won't come, Jiang Cheng should get to Yunmeng in a day or two."**

**He looked back, "Jiang Cheng is smart. The Wen Sect can't stop him."**

Such faith.

Jiang Cheng closed his eyes. He dared to be jealous of this? He was such a fool. Wei Wuxian could only depend on him and the other Jiang disciples to get him help. Of course he was grateful. Of course he thought his actions heroic.

When had that faith broken? When did he stop thinking he would find some way to save him?

Was it when he wrapped his hands around his throat and tried to do the opposite? Was it when Wei Wuxian had to save him, both from the Wens and from the despair of losing his golden core? Was it when he didn't stand up for A-Jie to Jin Guangshan? All of those combined?

Something else he missed in his foolishness?

**“That’s not going to work,” Lan Wangji said.**

**“Ah?” Wei Wuxian frowned.**

**“Cloud Recesses...has been burned,” Lan Wangji told him.**

**Wei Wuxian froze, and hesitantly asked, “Are your people safe? Your shufu? Your brother?”**

**“Shufu is badly wounded,” Lan Wangji’s eyes filled with tears, “Xiongzhong is missing.”**

His brother grabbed his hand and squeezed it, before pulling away.

Lan Wangji nodded to him. This was in the past. Xichen came back well, and Uncle recovered. Their Sect recovered as well.

It seemed a minor tragedy compared to the suffering of others.

**“What?” Wei Wuxian stared at him, “Zewu-Jun is missing?” He quickly turned back to the fire, allowing Lan Wangji to grieve in pseudo-privacy, “Are you cold? I’ve dried my clothes,” He said with false cheer, “I can cover you with them. Get some sleep, and tomorrow, we...”**

**Wei Wuxian trailed off because Lan Wangji was already asleep. He shook off his robe and draped it over his body like a blanket, leaving only his injured leg exposed, “You’re finally asleep,” He said, “It must be nine in the evening now.” He smiled, “So the unbearable daily schedule of the Lan Sect can be of use here.”**

**He settled down on the wall next to him, his hands laced behind his head, “We’re trapped here because we’ve angered Wen Chao. I wonder how Jiang Cheng and Yunmeng are doing.”**

Wei Wuxian was truly...unbelievable.

“He’s doing what you do,” Jin Zixuan realized, looking at his wife, “Channeling his worries into fussing.”

She blinked slowly, then hummed, “Hanguang-Jun deserved some fussing.”

It was so strange. Jiang Wanyin expressed his worry through anger, but his siblings found something else to focus on. Someone else to focus on. Instead of being upset themselves,

they distracted themselves by making soup, or in this instance, making Hanguang-Jun as warm and comfortable as possible.

Or even further back. Instead of worrying about his injuries from the dungeon, he focused solely on Hanguang-Jun's leg.

"Everyone shows love in a different way," His wife shook her head, "Until you understand another's love language, gestures are bound to get lost in translation."

Was this a gesture of Wei Wuxian's love?

**When Lan Wangji woke up, Wei Wuxian was tending to the fire, "Are you awake?" He asked, nodding to himself, "Okay. So it is around five in the morning now."**

**Lan Wangji brought his hand up to his forehead ribbon, which was now securely in place.**

**Wei Wuxian looked at him, "I thought you'd feel nervous without the forehead ribbon, so I put it on for you." Lan Wangji slowly brought his hand down and averted his gaze, "I swam around at the bottom of the pond just now. I think that guy is really smart. He will find us before a joss stick burns out. I didn't find the hole Jiang Cheng mentioned."**

**Their gazes met again, "I am afraid it has been plugged up by the monster."**

**"With your wound," Lan Wangji said, "You shouldn't go into the water."**

**Wei Wuxian smiled, "I'm not so delicate."**

Jiang Yanli looked at her brother, and they both heard the echo of their father in A-Xian's declaration.

It really was sweet the way A-Xian put back Hanguang-Jun's forehead ribbon. From the way his hair was styled correctly, he put effort into getting it right. She meant what she said to her husband. Her and A-Xian liked to take care of the people they loved. Since she could cook, she made food for her loved ones.

For A-Xian, it was small things like this. It was a paperman he'd send to dance for her. It was the smile he would offer in the most desperate of circumstances. It's the sincere words he would share in intimate moments.

Everyone expected a large gesture or declaration, but that would only come if A-Xian was forced into it. They didn't realize how subtle he could be.

They didn't realize the first person to show him love was her.

**"But you...how is the medicine Wen Ning gave me?" Lan Wangji just nodded, so Wei Wuxian continued, "Jiang Cheng has been gone for so long. I don't know how long it will take before he finds reinforcements. I guess we have to stay here for a period of time. We're still in the middle of a fight against that monster."**

**“What do you think the monster looks like?” Lan Wangji asked.**

**“A tortoise,” Wei Wuxian answered quickly, “A big tortoise.”**

**Lan Wangji stared at the fire, “There’s a mythical creature with a similar shape.”**

**Wei Wuxian tilted his head, “A mythical creature?” He moved closer to Lan Wangji, “The mythical creature you mention is Xuanwu, right? Xuanwu is also called Xuanming. A water deity that is the combination of a tortoise and a snake.”**

**“Exactly,” Lan Wangji confirmed.**

**“Is there a mythical creature with a mouth filled with ugly tusks?” Wei Wuxian wondered, “And it even eats humans. There’s a big difference between imagination and reality!” He shook out his robe again.**

**“It is not the real Xuanwu,” Lan Wangji replied, “But I heard there was a fake Xuanwu. It is similar to this monster.”**

**“A fake Xuanwu,” Wei Wuxian repeated, “What is that?”**

**“Do you still remember what Master Lan Yi mentioned before?” Lan Wangji asked, “The Xuanwu of Slaughter.”**

**Wei Wuxian looked away, “The Xuanwu of Slaughter?” He thought back to the other cave they’d been trapped in, then gasped, “Oh! I remember. As you’ve mentioned, it’s similar to this big tortoise. Could it be that this is the big tortoise Xue Chonghail left hundreds of years ago, the Xuanwu of Slaughter?”**

**Jin Guangshan blinked.**

**Of course it was! Why hadn’t he thought of it earlier? If this was the mythical beast belonging to Xue Chonghai, it made sense there would be more Yin Iron there.**

**It also made sense that the Yin Iron there would be more powerful than the other pieces. All the others were stored in places with strong natural energy. It might not have lessened their power, but the lack of resentment likely caused a stagnation in their power.**

**Meanwhile, this piece, the piece that would go on to become the Stygian Tiger Amulet, lived in or near the Xuanwu of Slaughter. It fed off the monster and its victims’ energies, becoming stronger over the centuries as its brethren remained the same. Not even a decade with Wen Ruohan overcame such a difference.**

**It was all through chance.**

**“That’s right,” Lan Wangji said.**

**Wei Wuxian grimaced, “Ay, nevermind. Whatever it is. We have been told to be chivalrous and venture together. If we can kill the big tortoise today, then we are going**

**to get some chivalric fame for ourselves. Even if, unfortunately, we get killed by the monster, it would be death by a creature aged hundreds of thousands...”**

**“No,” He corrected himself after a pause, “Death by a big monster that’s ten thousand years old. It’s not shameful even if people find out, right?”**

**Lan Wangji just stared at him.**

“That’s really what you thought?” Nie Huaisang asked.

“There was a chance we wouldn’t be rescued,” Hanguang-Jun answered.

Nie Huaisang grimaced. Right. The Lan Sect couldn’t spare anyone for them. Neither could the Nie, even though that was his original plan. He wasn’t sure how they ended up going to Lanling to plead to the Jin, but maybe it was Jin Zixuan’s secret nice side. He must have seen how desperate Jiang Cheng was and decided to help.

“Better to go down fighting,” Da-ge nodded.

Huaisang couldn’t hold back his comment, “Better to not go down at all.

His brother turned to him, and he met his gaze defiantly. He would keep insisting on this, until he got his way or Da-ge went into a qi deviation. Maybe he wasn’t that upset at his scheming when it was targeted at the Jins, but this was crossing a line.

Well, it wasn’t quite crossing the line but it was a clear communication of his intent to cross the line in the near future, which was the same thing.

Da-ge sighed, “Huaisang...you’ll never understand.”

Was that something to be ashamed of? He could have been a decent cultivator if he tried. He just didn’t believe their family tradition was worth their lives. It would be a greater insult to become the Nie Sect Leader and practice another cultivation method than it was to just be a terrible cultivator overall.

“I don’t pretend to understand idiocy,” He hissed under his breath, earning a sharp look from MianMian, who didn’t understand the subtext.

Yet.

**The memories skipped to Wei Wuxian assisting Lan Wangji into the part of the cavern with the pond. All the corpses were gone, as were their swords, but the bows and arrows were left behind. Silently, they began to gather weapons, glancing at the shell every few seconds to make sure they remained undetected.**

**Lan Wangji then worked to remove the bow strings and tie them together, while Wei Wuxian bundled arrows together. It wasn’t long before Lan Wangji had an acceptable chord, which he practiced with against the wall of the cave.**

**“The Chord Assassination Technique,” Wei Wuxian noted.**

**“The guqin has seven strings, arranged thickest to thinnest,” Lan Wangji explained, “Which can be split and combined. It cuts through bones and meat like mud. We can break through it from within.”**

**“I agree with breaking through it within,” Wei Wuxian pointed, “But according to what I have heard, the Chord Assassination Technique of your Sect is limited to the inside of the tortoise shell, which will hamper your performance. Moreover, due to your leg injury, the effect of the Chord Assassination Technique will be greatly reduced. Listen to me.”**

**Wei Wuxian smiled, “The shell of the Tortoise of Slaughter is as solid as a fort. The scarfskin is extremely hard. It seems impossible to break. But moreover, the fleshy part in the shell is likely to be fragile. I can creep inside its shell to find its weakness and focus on attacking it. I’ll force it out of its shell.”**

**“Once it is out of the shell, you can use the Chord Assassination Technique,” Wei Wuxian laid out the plan, “Let’s attack from both the inside and outside and fight it to our last breath. Let’s see who will die first.”**

A good plan.

Once again, Wei Wuxian was taking on more of the risk. He had good reasons to, but it didn’t change that Lan Wangji had a much smaller risk of being eaten.

Good plan or no, they couldn’t see how they managed to take down the Xuanwu. They didn’t even have the Wen Sect swords anymore. Wei Wuxian’s only weapons were his talismans, which likely required more spiritual energy than he could spare while practicing inedia, and the bunches of arrows. He wasn’t even left with a single bow with which to fire.

Hanguang-Jun was left with only a chord. While it was a more familiar weapon, it wasn’t an instrument. It wouldn’t have the same effect as his guqin. He was also more seriously injured than Wei Wuxian and more limited in his mobility.

The odds were still very much stacked against them, even if they were confident.

**“Be careful,” Lan Wangji advised, then concentrated his spiritual energy to his fingers and transferred it to Wei Wuxian’s head.**

**They proceeded to do as planned.**

**Wei Wuxian covered his nose as he entered the shell, cringing at the terrible smell. As he wandered further in, he took in the strange sight of banners hanging in the space, the surface squishing beneath his feet.**

**“ *How is it?* ” Lan Wangji projected.**

Some noted the use of the Silent Communication. This time without the paperman as a mediator.

No one asked for more, since the fight was finally starting.

***“ Luckily, you didn’t go in, ” Wei Wuxian replied, covering his nose again, “ Even if the smell didn’t make you vomit, you could faint from the stench .” He gagged and forced himself not to throw up.***

**His concerns about the smell abruptly faded when he noted the dead body standing close to him. Multiple dead bodies. He moved closer tentatively, then turned away to examine another group of bodies. He peered even closer, examining the corpse’s face, before staggering back, his hand coming up to his golden core.**

***“ Lan Zhan, ” His mental voice sounded weaker, “ The monster is so horrible. It not only eats human flesh, it also digests spiritual cognition. ” He shook his head.***

***“ Just like the Yin Iron, ” Lan Wangji noted.***

**Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened, and he backed away slowly from the dead. He bumped into a sword, which was imbued with resentment. He reached down to grasp the hilt.**

**Immediately, his mind was filled with screams. He held on for a few seconds, then opened his eyes and released it. The screams faded but didn’t go silent.**

**“A sword of Yin Iron.”**

**Jin Zixuan exchanged a worried look with Jiang Cheng and Hanguang-Jun at his father’s words. There was too much interest in his tone. A desire bordering on obsession.**

**It scared him because he didn’t know what to do. Usually he would just ignore this, but this sword would become the Stygian Tiger Amulet. The Amulet was with Wei Wuxian. His father was the type of man to do anything to get what he wanted. Jin Zixuan couldn’t let that happen to his brother-in-law. Whatever it was.**

**Whatever it had already been.**

**But he didn’t know what to do. This was his father. All the rest of his peers...their parents were dead. Even if his father was a terrible person, he didn’t want his time as Sect Leader to start by usurping him.**

**He tried to catch his brother’s gaze, and Guangyao raised an eyebrow at him.**

**Jin Zixuan flicked his gaze at their father, then frowned.**

**Guangyao’s lips tightened into a firm line.**

**So he saw the same thing. Maybe he’d always seen the same thing. He probably knew more about his father’s plans for this. Was he willingly working with their father? Was his father using him? Jin Zixuan was the Sect Heir and he still felt trapped. What could Guangyao hope to do if he dared go against their father?**

**The surge of resentment woke the Xuanwu, who began to move.**



***“ The resentment is so strong, ” Wei Wuxian stood still, “ It seems it’s the sword that trapped the Xuanwu of Slaughter here.”***

**The Xuanwu’s head snaked towards him, and Wei Wuxian grabbed the sword again. The screams went silent as he sliced at the gaping mouth of the monster. When it snapped again, he forced it back with a bundle of arrows. He dodged the next attempt and stabbed the top of its head. The next strike forced him against the shell.**

**With his back to the wall, he used the sword to stab through the monster’s lower jaw. The blade got stuck, and he held on tightly as the Xuanwu’s head retracted. As he emerged from the shell, he shouted, “Lan Zhan!”**

**Lan Wangji was ready on the shore. He immediately anchored the chord to the Xuanwu’s neck and pulled. When that didn’t have an effect he adjusted his position. Then again while Wei Wuxian continued to be thrown about. Yanked forward, Lan Wangji moved to the shell. He rewound the chord around the Xuanwu’s throat and pulled back.**

**As Wei Wuxian kept the Xuanwu from turning to attack Lan Wangji, he began to hear the screaming again. He looked at his fist holding the hilt, watching as resentment began to pour out of it. Blood oozed out of his grip, and he closed his eyes, trying to focus past the screams. He opened them again as the screams turned to mutters.**

**Nie Mingjue wondered if demonic cultivation was still like this, or if Wei Wuxian found a way past the screaming of enraged souls.**

**He tried to think of it as different from his Sect’s techniques. They never used resentment that came from humans. They solely cultivated with the power of demonic beasts. They didn’t consider it a true deviation from the accepted path. They didn’t commit heresy by disrespecting the dead.**

**Yet he found it difficult at times to contain Baxia’s bloodlust. There was a constant urge to pull his saber out and slaughter anyone who crossed him.**

**Was that what Wei Wuxian faced, only his resentment had words? Instead of a mass of incomprehensible anger, were there memories? Clear intent?**

**Nie Mingjue knew he would be lost when that rage consumed him, when he could no longer differentiate between himself and Baxia. When they would no longer be at odds but united in single-minded destruction.**

**“Wei Ying!” Lan Wangji shouted, noticing the other’s struggle. He pulled on the chord tighter, tight enough that his hand started bleeding as well.**

**The screams grew louder, and Wei Wuxian stopped flailing. He smirked and reached out with his other hand, the resentful energy spreading across his entire body. He turned his palm down, using the energy to seek something. Then he turned his palm towards the Xuanwu, and all the swords that had been missing earlier emerged.**

**The swords stabbed into the Xuanwu's neck.**

“Demonic cultivation,” Lan Xichen whispered.

Though here, it looked more like possession. It was difficult to say. The resentment in the cave must have come from those killed by the Xuanwu. Wei Wuxian was trying to kill the Xuanwu. United in purpose, it was impossible to say whether Wei Wuxian was in control of himself here.

“It is as he said,” Uncle commented, “Back when he was a student.”

The executioner question. Why not use the victims against their killer?

“It was the only way,” Wangji stated.

The fourth way, when the three accepted methods were unavailable to them. There was no exorcising this beast. There was only destroying it.

“This is why you never spoke of how it was defeated,” Lan Xichen realized.

“He cheated,” Jin Zixun declared.

“Could you have done it?” Jiang Yanli challenged, “Could any of you have wielded that sword in such a situation? Draw your enemy's blood as your weapon draws yours?”

“Demonic cultivation has a toll,” Wangji agreed, “Would you pay it?”

Given Wei Wuxian's tendency towards self-sacrifice, it was no question for him. Especially when it was Wangji he was dying for.

Somehow, despite all his virtues and sacrifice, it was incomprehensible to him that Wangji would sacrifice the same, would love him the same.

**With the monster weakened, Lan Wangji finished strangling it, pulling so hard the chord snapped.**

**The Xuanwu's head jerked, allowing Wei Wuxian to pull the sword out of its jaw. They both fell into the water as Lan Wangji jumped to the shore. He turned back, his eyes widening when Wei Wuxian didn't immediately surface.**

**Lan Wangji ran into the water, pulling Wei Wuxian's body out and dragging him further onto shore. He reclined him against some rocks, “Wei Ying.” He shook his shoulders, “Wei Ying.” He tapped his face, “Wake up. Wake up.”**

**Wei Wuxian did, and immediately spat blood, clutching the sword closer to his chest.**

“Why would he keep using demonic cultivation?” Nie Huaisang wondered.

“Desperation,” Hanguang-Jun answered.

“Did he use it when Lotus Pier was attacked?” He followed up.

Jiang Cheng winced, “Wei Wuxian was...incapacitated before the attack.”

Incapacitated. Did that mean it took him that long to recover from using the Yin Iron? Or would it have taken him as long anyway because he also needed to recover from days without food and a depletion of spiritual energy? Did he get hurt again once he got home? He wouldn’t put it past Wei Wuxian to injure himself further by doing too much too fast.

Or did he not think he would lose everything? Presumably he kept this sword, meaning he had it at Lotus Pier. Did he not think to use it then?

“It doesn’t look like he planned to use it here,” Jin Zixuan said slowly, “I mean, he picked up the sword because he needed a weapon, and then the voices...”

“Could the Yiling Patriarch be possessed?” Sect Leader Yao asked.

That was an intriguing question. Wei Wuxian was certainly different than he used to be, but that could just as easily be explained by trauma than any internal struggle against resentful spirits. He doubted there was anyone throughout history as willful as Wei Wuxian either. No, if there were voices in his head, they were ones he allowed to be there.

“Would you excuse his actions if he were?” Nie Huaisang tilted his head.

Was it still his fault for choosing to be a host for it? What if he ended up truly depending on demonic cultivation in another desperate circumstance like this cave?

“There is no excuse for demonic cultivation,” Teacher Lan narrowed his eyes at him.

Nie Huaisang raised his eyebrows, “How ungrateful. He saved your nephew’s life.”

“And his own,” The elder reminded him.

He smiled tightly, “You really believe he thought he would live?”

Silence fell over the room again at his question.

**He coughed weakly, then turned back, “Is it dead?” He whispered worriedly, “Lan Zhan, is it dead?”**

**Lan Wangji hovered, then nodded, “Yes.”**

**“Yes?” Wei Wuxian repeated, his eyes wide and unfocused, “Is it dead?”**

**“Yes, it is,” Lan Wangji assured him.**

**Wei Wuxian’s labored breathing settled, “Lan Zhan. Just now I heard many voices screaming in my ears, which knocked me unconscious. Am I dreaming?”**

**“No,” Lan Wangji whispered.**

**Wei Wuxian slowly smiled and let out a pitiful laugh, “Little did I think before that one day, I would get to see Lan-er-gongzi acting so concerned like this.” He gasped and adjusted his grip on the sword, “Lan Zhan. I didn’t think I would survive this.”**

“Why didn’t you mention any of this, Wangji?” Lan Qiren demanded, “You must have known it was Yin Iron.”

Perhaps he was deflecting from Nie Huaisang being right, but he didn’t know what to think. Demonic cultivation shouldn’t be allowed under any circumstance...yet he couldn’t, in his heart, say he wouldn’t have used the sword if it meant saving Wangji’s life. It was ungrateful to condemn him.

For now.

“There was much happening. It seemed irrelevant,” Wangji answered.

It was. Any Yin Iron not in Wen Ruohan’s hands wasn’t a priority. If Wangji told him and the other elders, that was only more people for Wen Ruohan to potentially hear about the sword and attempt to take it for himself.

Unless...

“Was that truly why Lotus Pier was attacked?” Lan Qiren asked.

“What?” Jiang Wanyin sat up straighter.

“Yin Iron recognizes itself,” Lianfeng-Zun followed his line of thought, “If the Wen Sect searched the cave after your escape, perhaps they recognized its power. If the Xuanwu was the only thing keeping it hidden...”

“You said Wei-xiong was incapacitated before the attack began,” Nie Huaisang tensed, “Did the Wen Sect try something with him? Try to make him desperate?”

Jiang Wanyin swore, confirming their thoughts. The sword was potentially relevant, more so than Wei Wuxian and Wangji may have realized.

**Lan Wangji pressed the back of his hand to his forehead, “Wei Ying, you have a fever.”**

**Wei Wuxian coughed again, slumping against the rock. As he struggled to breath, Lan Wangji took his arm and started to transfer his own spiritual energy. Slowly, Wei Wuxian’s shivering stopped, his breathing settling, “That’s so soothing, Lan Zhan,” He muttered.**

**Wei Wuxian’s eyes slowly opened, but Lan Wangji’s focus was on helping him, “It’s so boring,” Wei Wuxian complained, “Why hasn’t Jiang Cheng showed up and rescued me yet?” He sighed, “It’s so quiet.” He smiled, “Lan Zhan,” He tugged playfully at his arm, “Can you sing a song for me? I know you won’t ignore me.”**

**Lan Wangji began to hum quietly. Wei Wuxian slumped again, a small smile on his face. They both thought about their time together leading up to this moment, and Wei**

**Wuxian smiled, only semi-conscious.**

Lan Wangji noted the color. It didn't surprise him that Wei Ying didn't remember this or thought it worthy of sharing. His fever was high and his exhaustion unparalleled. He hoped the song helped drive out the sounds of the screams.

He thought he'd been protecting Wei Ying by not sharing the details of their victory, but if he'd told his uncle about the Yin Iron sword...could he have been given more people to search for Wei Ying? If so, would they have found the Jiang Sect survivors before they were separated? Could he have been in time to save Wei Ying before he turned to demonic cultivation?

There was no point in dwelling on what ifs. And yet...

**"It sounds so pleasant," Wei Wuxian whispered, "It sounds so pleasant." He forced his eyes open, "Lan Zhan, what's the name of this song?"**

**Lan Wangji stopped humming and watched Wei Wuxian's eyes slowly close.**

**"Wangxian," Lan Wangji whispered, but it was impossible to tell if Wei Wuxian heard him.**

"Forgetting envy."

Jiang Yanli tried to commit the song to memory, before deciding to just ask Hanguang-Jun to play it later. She smiled at him, "A beautiful name." If slightly ironic because of his jealous streak, "I assume you wrote that yourself?"

Hanguang-Jun nodded.

"We get it," A-Cheng rolled his eyes, "You love him. I didn't need to know that song was yours."

Hanguang-Jun froze, "He remembers?"

"He remembers the song," A-Cheng scowled, "He told me it was a Gusu lullaby."

Zewu-Jun frowned this time, "But--"

"Wei-xiong's memory is funny like that," Nie Huaisang interrupted, "He'll remember a song, but not where he heard it. Same with poems he likes, or sayings. If you want him to remember something clearly, give him food."

"Wait," Her husband held up his hand, "Is that why you chose to go to Gusu? You thought you confessed and decided to run away?"

Lianfeng-Zun snorted, "Is that not what you did?"

A-Xuan flushed, "Well, yes, but now I'm not the only one!"

**When Wei Wuxian woke up, he still had the sword, but he was lying on the ground near a tree. He flexed his grip, flinched away from the light, and noticed Jin Zixuan tending to a fire.**

**Jin Zixuan hurried over, “Wei Wuxian, if you’re awake, get up already.” Wei Wuxian stared at him in disbelief, “You are so heavy. Even the stone was lighter than you.”**

**“It’s you,” Wei Wuxian said dumbly.**

**Jin Zixuan snorted, “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not here for you.”**

**Wei Wuxian huffed a laugh, “Anyway, I should thank you a lot.” He coughed, making Jin Zixuan look uncomfortable.**

**“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng came running, kneeling and reaching out to him, “You’re awake?”**

**“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian stared.**

**“Wei Wuxian,” Jiang Cheng’s hand retracted and he hit him, “You’re finally awake.” When Wei Wuxian gasped, he grabbed him again, more gently.**

**“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian repeated, “Here you are at last. It’s been many days since you escaped.” His eyes widened, “How is Lan Zhan?”**

**Jiang Cheng grimaced, “He left.”**

He left because he didn’t know how his confession would be received.

Lan Xichen sighed. He couldn’t say he was always forthright with his emotions. That A-Yao didn’t understand he loved him was partly because of that. They were raised to not let their emotions rule them. They were raised to not be like their parents.

The mood in the room shifted. They thought they would see an epic battle, not Wei Wuxian’s first attempts at demonic cultivation.

Though there was no outright condemnation because they saw how much it cost him. They saw it wasn’t recklessness or ambition that drove him to using resentment, but desperation and love.

It made him wonder if maybe that was why he disappeared for three months. He couldn’t control demonic cultivation there, but they needed it for the war. Why not go into seclusion until he knew he wouldn’t be a liability on the battlefield? It was the responsible thing to do, and Wei Wuxian was no fool.

Responsible demonic cultivation...he never thought he would think that.

**“He left?” Wei Wuxian looked pained, “He’s still injured.”**

**“Who didn’t get any injuries?” Jiang Cheng wondered, “Now the GusuLan are a mess. He went back by himself.”**

**Wei Wuxian inhaled sharply, “Then he...”**

**“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng complained, “Why don’t you thank me first? Do you know that in order to save you Jin-gongzi and I went without sleep for seven days?”**

**Wei Wuxian coughed again, and Jiang Cheng had to help support him, “Seven days? It’s been that long?”**

**“Exactly,” Jiang Cheng looked away, “The nearest regions, Gusu and Qinghe, were all occupied by the Wen Sect. We had to go to Lanling first, but this time, we should thank Jin-gongzi.” He glanced at him and nodded, “If Jin-gongzi hadn’t persuaded Jin-zongzhu into fighting against the Wen Sect, we couldn’t have brought anyone to save you.”**

A few whispered some choice comments about Jin Guangshan.

It was no secret that the main contributions from the Jin Sect to the Sunshot Campaign were from Jin Guangshan’s sons. Jin Zixuan led what few disciples they spared. Jin Guangyao spied and ultimately killed Wen Ruohan.

Yet there Jin Guangshan sat, higher than the rest of them.

The least effort for the most reward.

**Jiang Cheng bowed his head again, “I don’t have a sword. If I had chosen to return to Yunmeng, it would’ve been more than seven days.”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, “Yes, I forgot that none of you have a sword.” His eyes widened again, “What about Wen Chao? Where is his group? Didn’t they stop you?”**

**“Strange as it is,” Jin Zixuan answered, “I don’t know what’s happening to the Wen Sect lately. Wen Chao and Wen Xu were sent away. It seems that they are looking for something.”**

Xue Yang’s Yin Iron?

Or the sword they potentially sensed?

**“Otherwise, how could we dig the hole and take you out of the cave so easily?” Jiang Cheng added. He then helped Wei Wuxian stand.**

**“Anyways, you saved us this time,” Wei Wuxian saluted, “Thank you very much.”**

**Jin Zixuan returned the salute, then turned to Jiang Cheng, “Jiang-gongzi. Now that they have been rescued, let’s get out of here. The state of the other Sects joining forces against the Wen Sect has been decided. Other surviving disciples have gathered in**

**Lanling. Maybe this will attract Wen Ruohan's attention. Although nothing happened now, we have to be prepared for the Wen Sect's retaliation."**

**"Wei Wuxian and I will rush back as soon as possible," Jiang Cheng decided, "To persuade my father and discuss how to suppress the Wen Sect together."**

**"Great," Jin Zixuan nodded, "Let's part ways here." He saluted again.**

**"Take care," Jiang Cheng saluted back.**

**"That was unexpected," Wei Wuxian commented as soon as left, "Jin-gongzi is really responsible."**

**"Let's go," Jiang Cheng ignored him.**

**Wei Wuxian waited for them to walk away, then looked down at the sword in his hands. His hand trembled as he reached for the hilt, but this time, there was no reaction. He turned it over, before being called out to keep up.**

This was the beginning of the end of Wei Wuxian and the first hint of the Yiling Patriarch.

Yet none of it was his choice.

It was a cruel fate. He kept sacrificing himself for others, and each sacrifice damaged his cultivation, his body, his mind. Until he was pushed past the point where even Hanguang-Jun couldn't pull him back.

## Chapter End Notes

Does something small ever make y'all extremely happy?

This week for me was my two watching the series fics finally being put in the same collection. So thank you to [Lightning Priestess](#) for that! Though I'm not sure how collections work so maybe someone else put them in there!

Anyways, again, thanks for the lovely comments and the kudos! Remember, I post this story as I write it so any ideas are welcome, even if I can't promise they'll be included!



# Who is at Fault?

## Chapter Summary

No one? Everyone? What is the point of blame?

## Chapter Notes

Buckle up, dear readers. We're going for a ride.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jiang Cheng found himself ready to rewatch losing his home.

If only for what Lan Qiren said. Wei Wuxian brought that damned sword home, stored in a qiankun pouch. If the Wen Sect knew the Xuanwu was dead, they must have sent someone to check. Wen Chao, the idiot that he was, still knew what the Yin Iron felt like. If not, Wen Ruohan could probably sense it off him when he went to report.

He had always thought they could have had more time. If Wei Wuxian hadn't saved Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan, maybe the Wen Sect would have attacked Gusu again, or gone after Lanling.

Yet that would never have happened. Wei Wuxian had Yin Iron. Wen Ruohan would stop at nothing to get it.

They just never came out and demanded it. Not like they demanded of Lan Wangji. Instead, Wen Ruohan left Wen Chao and Wang Lingjiao in charge of retrieving it, and they decided to go directly for torture. They tried to make Wei Wuxian desperate by threatening to cut off a limb.

It would have worked on a sane individual, but Wei Wuxian didn't value his life at all.

He probably didn't realize that's what they were after.

If he had...would he have given up the sword for the Jiang Sect?

Would they all have been doomed if Wen Ruohan had the power of the Stygian Tiger Amulet?

**When they finally returned to Lotus Pier, they found Jiang Fengmian teaching the younger disciples archery while the others shot kites.**

**“Jiang-shushu, I want to shoot kites too,” Wei Wuxian called out.**

**“A-Cheng, A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli beamed at them, the other disciples also abandoning their tasks to crowd around.**

**“Shijie!” Wei Wuxian smiled back, but his focus soon turned to Jiang Fengmian.**

**“You’re back,” Jiang Fengmian said.**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, then passed out.**

**“Wei Ying!”**

Lan Wangji couldn’t help the surprised cry, nor the regret he now felt in his gut for not going to Yunmeng. He let himself be controlled by fear. He ran away from Wei Ying.

Maybe it was only fair that Wei Ying ran away when he came back.

Neither Jiang Yanli nor Jiang Wanyin told him Wei Ying was okay. There was no point. From here forward, Wei Ying would not be okay. Life would only get worse.

“He’s alive,” Xichen whispered, “He’s still alive.”

“By a certain definition,” Lianfeng-Zun added.

“A-Yao,” His brother scolded.

Wangji just grimaced. Lianfeng-Zun had a point. The rest of the room spoke as though Wei Ying and the Yiling Patriarch were two different people. They weren’t entirely wrong. Wei Ying had changed. With as much as he’d lost, as much as he sacrificed, how could he have stayed the same?

**The next time Wei Wuxian woke up, he was in his room. Jiang Yanli was seated on his bed, wetting a cloth to attend to him. She smiled, “You’re awake.”**

**“Shijie,” He stayed laying down.**

**She checked him for a fever, “Great. Your fever is finally gone.”**

**“Shijie, I’m thirsty,” Wei Wuxian whispered.**

**“Alright.” Jiang Cheng entered the room, “Don’t worry. A-Jie, here’s the soup that you boiled. I’m bringing it over.”**

**Wei Wuxian slowly sat up and accepted the soup. He started shoving it into his mouth, “It’s good, Shijie.” Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli exchanged smiles, “The lotus root and rib soup you make is the best in the world.” Jiang Yanli giggled, “You don’t know that, those days in the cave, when I was hungry, all I could think about was this soup.”**

**“Take your time,” Jiang Yanli advised, “Don’t finish it in a rush. There’s more in the pot.”**

**“It’s good!” Wei Wuxian complimented again.**

**“A-Xian!” Jiang Fengmian called out as he entered the room, “How are you? Do you feel better?” Wei Wuxian tried to rise to greet him, but was stopped, “Don’t get out of bed.”**

**“Jiang-shushu, I feel much better now,” Wei Wuxian reported.**

**Jiang Yanli then reached into her sash to pass him a cloth. Wei Wuxian pouted, “I want Shijie to wipe my mouth.”**

**“Don’t you have hands?” Jiang Cheng playfully scolded.**

**Wei Wuxian closed his eyes, “My hands are too heavy to lift up.”**

**Jiang Yanli wiped his mouth kindly, “I’ll make some other things for you.” Then she left.**

Jin Guangyao shook his head.

Of course it would be the simple things that pleased Wei Wuxian. Food was more than he had as a child on the streets. Someone to take care of him was more than he had as an orphan. The smallest things were a blessing for him. What everyone else in this room took for granted, was in itself a reward for Wei Wuxian.

Well, everyone else in this room except for Jin Guangyao.

How did this satisfy Wei Wuxian? How could he sit there and not want more? Was it because these simple acts weren’t dangled as a possibility in Koi Tower, if only he did such and such? If Jin Guangyao had something like this, a real family, would he not constantly crave more?

If he abandoned his chance of a real family by betraying his father...would he always feel empty?

But it wasn’t like Wei Wuxian and the Jiangs were connected by blood.

His half-brother was also a better person than he had previously believed. Maybe opposing Jin Guangshan wouldn’t mean being thrown out of the Jin Sect.

Was it a risk he could take? With Madam Jin still hating him?

He took a calming breath. He would see how Madam Yu and Wei Wuxian’s relationship ended. He heard Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin only survived because Madam Yu smuggled them away. If she did that out of any secret regard for the boy her husband had all but adopted...then maybe he could trust Jin Zixuan.

**Jiang Fengmian took her spot on the bed, “A-Xian, you’ve suffered a lot this time.”**

**Wei Wuxian shook his head, “Jiang-shushu, I’m actually okay. I just stayed in that cave for a few days.” He glanced at Jiang Cheng, whose lips tightened, “But it was Jiang Cheng who has suffered a lot to save me.”**

**Jiang Fengmian glanced at his son, then smiled, “Well done.” But he was still looking at Wei Wuxian.**

**“Congratulations,” Jiang Cheng said.**

**“Congratulations on what?” Wei Wuxian demanded, “What a pity that you weren’t there as well.” He pointed, “Otherwise, you could’ve taken some of the credit as well. You could’ve chatted with me and chased the boredom away. Good heavens, sitting face-to-face with Lan Zhan those days almost bored me to death.”**

**“Is Wei Wuxian always so dismissive of his own accomplishments?” Jin Zixuan asked.**

Not for himself, but for the flicker of sadness that passed through Hanguang-Jun’s eyes at his words. It was hard to tell if Wei Wuxian was being insincere or just exhausted, and the poor man deserved some clarification.

**“A-Xuan,” His mother sighed, as though the answer to his question was obvious.**

Her gaze flicked to Guangyao, and he blushed when he realized it was obvious.

It never occurred to him to be jealous of Guangyao. At first, he just ignored him. Then he was too concerned with how to court A-Li. Maybe he should have felt threatened. Guangyao came out of the war with a title. He was the sworn brother to two other Sect Leaders. He took on so many responsibilities that perhaps he should have shared.

Was this where his humility came from? He tried so hard to not be perceived as a threat, to not overstep. But there was a thin line between humility and humiliation.

Wei Wuxian only boasted when he was certain he wouldn’t overshadow Jiang Wanyin. He did so because he loved Jiang Wanyin, and wanted him to feel more loved by his parents. Guangyao simpered because...well, because he would be hurt if he didn’t. It wasn’t like it was out of any loyalty or fondness for Jin Zixuan.

**“You deserved it,” Jiang Cheng rose to his taunts, “You shouldn’t have played the hero and cared about all that crap. If, from the beginning, you hadn’t-”**

**“Jiang Cheng,” Jiang Fengmian interrupted, “Do you know what was inappropriate in what you have said?”**

**Jiang Cheng ducked his head, “Yes.”**

**“Jiang-shushu,” Wei Wuxian said, “It’s alright. He’s just angry and speaking carelessly.”**

**Jiang Fengmian continued staring at his son, “A-Cheng, there are some things that can’t be said, even if you’re angry. If you say them, it means that you still don’t**

**understand the motto of the Jiang Sect and that you still don't-**"

Jiang Cheng closed his eyes.

He'd crossed so many lines. He'd said so many things that never should have been said. The Jiang Sect wasn't what it was. For better or for worse.

It was his, and his alone.

As much as he complained about Wei Wuxian not helping him rebuild, part of him selfishly was happy. Yes, the Jiang Sect would truly uphold its motto if Wei Wuxian actively worked as Head Disciple, but then he would always feel like he used to. Like he wasn't good enough to be Sect Leader Jiang.

That he should try to be more like Wei Wuxian, rather than being himself.

**"Yes," Madam Yu interrupted, "He doesn't understand, but why does it matter as long as Wei Ying understands?" Jiang Fengmian sighed, and his wife continued, "Attempting the impossible is what he's good at, isn't it? Fooling around even though he knew it would bring trouble to his Sect?"**

**"What are you doing here?" Jiang Fengmian asked.**

**She laughed bitterly, "How funny it is that I am asked such a thing! Jiang-zongzhu, do you still remember that I am also the host of Lotus Pier? Do you still remember that every inch of land here is my territory? Do you know which of the two young men standing and sitting is your son?"**

**"Of course I do," Jiang Fengmian answered.**

**"So you do," Madam Yu sneered, "But there's no use in just simply knowing." She glared hatefully at Wei Wuxian, who just sat silently, "Wei Ying, you really can't take not stirring up some trouble for one day, can you? If I had known that, I would've made you stay in Lotus Pier properly and not allowed him outside."**

**"Could Wen Chao really have dared to do anything to the two young masters of the Lan and Jin Sects?" She continued, "Even if he dared to, it would mean that they ran out of luck. Since when was it your turn to play the hero? I'm saying this right now. You can just wait and see. One day, he'll definitely get our Sect into some big trouble!"**

MianMian tried to catch Nie Huaisang's eye, but her friend was already starting to fume.

Wei Wuxian would be incapacitated. Everyone assumed it was the Wen Sect's doing, but would Jiang Wanyin stand by as that happened? Surely the battle would start as soon as the Wen Sect tried to harm the Jiang Sect's Head Disciple.

Was it like what Wen Chao tried to have the other disciples do to her in that cave?

No. Jiang Wanyin would never allow that.

Unless it was his mother. She was the only person with the power to hurt Wei Wuxian who would actually do so if the Wen Sect asked. She also didn't understand how necessary Wei Wuxian's intervention was to the survival of Hanguang-Jun and Jin Zixuan.

**“Enough!” Jiang Fengmian snapped, rising from his seat, “Let’s talk when we get back.”**

**She shoved his arm down before he could touch her, “Talk about what? Get back where?” She turned back to Wei Wuxian, “I’ll talk here and now. I have nothing to be ashamed of anyway. Jiang Cheng, come over here.” Her son moved obediently, and she grabbed his arm, “Jiang-zongzhu, it seems there are some things I have to say.”**

**“Look carefully,” She insisted, “This is your own son, the future leader of Lotus Pier. Even if you frown upon him just because I was the one who gave birth to him, his surname is still Jiang! I know you have heard how people gossip that you still haven’t moved on from a certain Sanren, even after so many years have passed.”**

**Wei Wuxian looked up as she kept going, “He regards the son of his old friend as his own son. They’re speculating if Wei Ying is your-”**

**“Yu Ziyuan!” Jiang Fengmian snapped again, raising his voice.**

**“I pray Baoshan Sanren never descends from her mountain,” Huaisang almost growled.**

Nie Mingjue sat up straighter. Returning to Lotus Pier in the memories brought back his little brother's protective rage. It made sense in a way. Huaisang trusted him to deal with the Wen Sect. All his plans were only if he were to die, and he obviously didn't think that would happen during the Sunshot Campaign.

Madam Yu was the threat he'd tried to stealthily work around in his childhood.

Perhaps it was spiteful for him to allow Huaisang to speak ill of the dead, but Huaisang never got to say anything to her face.

“What do you mean?” Xichen asked.

“Why did everyone say Wei-xiong was Jiang Fengmian's child?” Huaisang asked, snapping his fan shut, “Because Jiang Fengmian was in love with his mother? What nonsense! One person's love doesn't make a child, not unless you're implying Jiang Fengmian was the sort of man to force himself on an unwilling woman.”

“Of course not!” Sect Leader Yao interjected, “But he was in love with her-”

“So what?” Huaisang interrupted, “If Cangse Sanren loved him back she would have married him. She was the great beauty of her generation and the disciple of an immortal. Any Sect would have welcomed her. Any man would have been blessed to be her husband. Yet she chose to marry Wei Changze! She married far below her station, so you know she married for love!”

“If you thought about it for one second you would understand that Wei-xiong could never be Jiang Fengmian’s. It’s so stupid!” His little brother fumed, “You all blamed their unhappiness on Cangse Sanren. You ruined Wei-xiong’s chance at being adopted because you all felt the need to comment on that which was none of your business.”

“It wasn’t our fault Madam Yu believed us,” Sect Leader Ouyang defended.

“Isn’t it? If you tell a lie enough times it takes on a truth of its own,” Huaisang glowered, “I wonder what came first, the rumors about Wei-xiong’s parentage or Madam Yu’s hatred of him? But none of you cared that you ruined a little boy’s life, did you?”

There were many clenched jaws. Nie Mingjue closed his eyes, reassessing the conversation they would have in his mind. He thought he’d need to warn Huaisang off using duplicitous means to achieve his ends, but it seemed he was more than aware of what spreading rumors would bring. He understood words hurt and his schemes could go beyond his intentions.

“So I pray Baoshan Sanren never descends from her mountain to see what you’ve done to her favorite disciple’s memory and son,” Huaisang snarled, “I’m sure the immortal will be so understanding of how such esteemed cultivators couldn’t comprehend such a basic concept as choices having consequences. Perhaps you didn’t start this rumor, but you perpetuated it.”

Nie Mingjue forced himself to relax. Baxia wanted to respond to Huaisang’s rage, but who was there to direct it at? Everyone? Some of their own disciples were guilty of speaking of Wei Wuxian’s parentage.

In hindsight, Huaisang always complained about that growing up. He would whine how it didn’t make sense for people to whisper about Wei Wuxian being Jiang Fengmian’s bastard and then call him the son of a servant. Those both couldn’t be true, yet they were both used to insult his friend. His protests were always ignored.

**“Jiang Fengmian!” Madam Yu shouted as well, “Do you think things will change if you raise your voice? Do you think I don’t know you?”**

**Jiang Fengmian raised an arm and pointed at her, “You!” Then he snapped it back to his side and left.**

**“Stop!” Madam Yu shouted, “I’m not done talking.” She followed him.**

**Jiang Cheng’s breathing grew faster, and he glanced back at Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian forced himself up, grabbing his shoes, “Jiang Cheng!” He called out, stumbling out of the bed, “Jiang Cheng!” He hopped, his shoes not completely on, “Jiang Cheng! Answer me if you heard me! Are you looking for a fight?”**

**“Go back to bed and lie down properly!” Jiang Cheng shouted back at him.**

**“I can’t do that,” Wei Wuxian protested, “We need to set things straight! You really shouldn’t listen to that nonsense.”**

**“What nonsense?” Jiang Cheng slowed down, allowing Wei Wuxian to catch up.**

**“Those things would dirty my mouth if I say them,” Wei Wuxian said, “Wait for me! Anyway, both my parents are real people in this world.”**

Even though they were Nie Huaisang’s words, they echoed in the hearts of the older adults in the room.

What had come first? No one questioned Wei Wuxian’s parentage until his parents were dead. There was certainly intrigue about Cangse Sanren choosing Wei Changze, but it wasn’t until Jiang Fengmian spent over a year searching for the boy that the rumors truly started.

Was it because none of them would look so hard for a child they were not responsible for? Did the rumors they indulged in speak more of their character than any truth in the world? Could Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian have been happy if they’d kept their mouths shut? Could Wei Wuxian have been Jiang Wuxian, spared of this cruelty, if they hadn’t been so careless?

There was a reason the Lan Sect had rules forbidding gossip.

For once, others could see the purpose of them. It wasn’t to keep things hidden, but to keep baseless lies from ruining lives.

**Wei Wuxian finally caught up, and wrapped his arm around him, “I don’t want others assigning me to other households! Listen.” He panted, “Let’s be honest. Don’t hide things so sulkily in your heart.”**

**“You’re Jiang-shushu’s own son,” Wei Wuxian reminded him, “The future leader of the Jiang Sect. Of course, Jiang-shushu would be stricter towards you.” He patted himself, “But I’m different. I’m the son of someone else. Both my parents are good friends of Jiang-shushu. Of course he would cut me some slack. You understand that, don’t you?”**

**“He’s not stricter with me,” Jiang Cheng shoved him away, “He just doesn’t like me.”**

**Wei Wuxian trailed after him again, “How can there be anyone who doesn’t like his own son?”**

Jiang Yanli glanced at her father-in-law.

If there was a man who could dislike his own child, it was Jin Guangshan. She adjusted her son in her arms, soothing his fussing. He was such a good child so far, but what did he have to cry about? He lacked for nothing.

Not like so many of the others in this room.

There were conditions for so many of them to get love from their parental figures. Hanguang-Jun and Zewu-Jun needed to follow their rules. Nie Huaisang had to hide his true strengths. Even her husband stayed in his father’s favor by largely ignoring what Jin Guangshan was.

Her gaze went to Jin Guangyao, whose reaction was once again unreadable. She wondered if he clung to those words, to the possibility of getting his father’s approval and recognition. He



was so smart, how did he not realize he would never get what he wanted from Jin Guangshan?

**Wei Wuxian grabbed Jiang Cheng again, “Stop thinking of such things! Those who have loose mouths, I’ll beat them up so hard their mothers won’t recognize them!”**

**“Such a man exists,” Jiang Cheng insisted, “He doesn’t like my mom, so he doesn’t like me either.” He sat down on the steps, “I know. I know that he doesn’t like my personality and I’m not the heir he wants. He thinks I don’t understand the motto of the Jiang Sect and I don’t have the spirit of the Sect in me. Those are all true!”**

**“You and Lan Wangji killed the Xuanwu of Slaughter, and bathed in blood! How great!” Jiang Cheng leaned on his knees, “But what about me?” Wei Wuxian sat down next to him, “I ran around for days, completely exhausted without a second of rest!”**

**“The motto means nothing,” Wei Wuxian nudged him, “I’m telling you. Do you have to follow it just because it’s a motto? Look at the principles of the Lan Sect. There are over three thousand. If people followed every single one of them, would they even be alive? And who said that being a Sect Leader means you have to go along with the style of the Sect?”**

**“I don’t believe that the many Sect Leaders in the Jiang Sect were all the same,” Wei Wuxian continued, “Even the GusuLan had a black sheep like Master Lan Yi, but who could deny her position and her abilities? When talking about the famous gentry of the Lan Sect, who could skip her? Who could skip her Chord Assassination Technique?”**

Nie Huaisang sighed. He missed Wei Wuxian so much sometimes. Without him, there was no one who would outright question the way things were. There was no one who would go against tradition to do what should be done.

So many of them collapsed under the burden of their ancestors. They couldn’t stay true to who they were and fulfill the duties and expectations of their position. Something had to give, and at a certain point they looked in the mirror and didn’t recognize who they were. It was too hard to have integrity and power.

Nie Huaisang always hoped to change the Nie Sect, to free them from the burden of their Sect’s techniques, but he knew that those changes would be impossible. Even if he became Sect Leader, his seniors wouldn’t listen to him like they did Da-ge. They would continue teaching his juniors the old ways, and so it would continue.

“I’m happy you’re different,” MianMian comforted.

He managed a thin smile, “Ah, you and Wei-xiong.”

“And me,” Da-ge said.

His smile wavered. He couldn’t believe that. If Da-ge was truly happy with his ideas, why not support him? Why not choose life over tradition?

Nie Huaisang would give anything to save his brother's life, to make him happy, but Da-ge would never give up his cultivation for him. Who would? In this world where cultivation was the measure of a person, it was too much to ask of anyone.

Even if they loved their brothers.

**Wei Wuxian waited for a response, then wrapped his arm around him again, "So just don't think about it. In the future, you'll be the Sect Leader, and I'll be your subordinate like your father and my father. So if the GusuLan has its Twin Jades, the YunmengJiang will have its Twin Heroes! So no one can say you don't deserve it. Got it?"**

**He pointed at him, "Even yourself. If there's someone who says so, I'll beat them up."**

**"Look at yourself now," Jiang Cheng said, elbowing him, "Who can you beat up?"**

**Wei Wuxian coughed, "Jiang Cheng."**

**"You're hurting so much now." Jiang Cheng sighed, "Why did you play the hero back then? Serves you right. That will teach you a lesson."**

**"Was I playing the hero then?" Wei Wuxian demanded, "I had no other choice!"**

**They both relaxed, letting the argument drop.**

**Wei Wuxian stretched his legs out and leaned back, "Jiang Cheng. Do you think we'll meet them again?"**

**"How would I know?" Jiang Cheng muttered.**

Anyone else would have been praised for their deeds.

Lan Xichen could forgive Jiang Wanyin's harshness here. Saving Wangji and Jin Zixuan had cost Wei Wuxian. If he'd been just a little more selfish, maybe he wouldn't have been injured. Maybe he wouldn't have nearly died in a cave without his family.

Still, it was galling to hear Madam Yu say they should have just let Wangji and the rest die.

No one else commented on it, so he kept his silence. Personally, he thought this was a lesson they should have learned from the Sunshot Campaign. They should know better than to believe the issues other Sects faced wouldn't eventually affect them. They were all living in the same world. They couldn't just ignore each other and go about their business.

At least Jiang Wanyin's words came from worry. Madam Yu...it wasn't just her being severe. She would have resented any action Wei Wuxian took that made him look better than her son. Or maybe she just resented Wei Wuxian regardless.

**"Do you ever hate Madam Jin?" He whispered to A-Yao.**

A-Yao froze, but slowly relaxed, “Yes, but I can’t blame her. Every mother wants what’s best for her child. Even if that means...”

“Being cruel to another child who is a threat,” Lan Xichen finished, “Do you want to be the Sect Leader?”

The smaller man tilted his head, “It would be...impossible.”

That didn’t mean he didn’t want it. Lan Xichen glanced at him. Why wouldn’t he want to be a Sect Leader? It would put him at equal standing with his sworn brothers. It would let him be in charge of himself, instead of always under someone else’s power.

As Sect Leader, maybe he would finally feel worthy.

**The next memory showed Jiang Cheng following his father into their reception hall. There, Sect Leader Yao was laid out on the floor. One of his disciples saluted from the floor, “The Yao Sect, here for Jiang-zongzhu.”**

**“Please get up,” Jiang Fengmian bent down to help him.**

**“Jiang-zongzhu,” Sect Leader Yao gripped his hand, and coughed.**

**“Who did such a brutal thing to Yao-zongzhu?” Jiang Fengmian asked.**

**“Jiang-zongzhu, the Yao’s disciples...” Sect Leader Yao trailed off, “After going through great loss, they ran back to Pingyang from Qishan, but were still slaughtered by the Wen Sect.” Jiang Cheng grimaced, “We, the Yao Sect, have now been exterminated.”**

**“Jiang-zongzhu,” One disciple continued, “Since we escaped from Qishan, the Wen Sect hunted us down, which led to the massacre. We are the only two left. Zongzhu was severely wounded protecting us. We had a narrow escape but had nowhere else to go. Jiang-zongzhu, we need your aid. Please help our Zongzhu.”**

**“A-Die,” Jiang Cheng spoke up, “Wen Ruohan has ordered to track down the disciples who escaped from Qishan and exterminate the Sects with no exceptions.”**

**“We, the Yao Sect, were isolated and weak,” Sect Leader Yao added, “And never intended to contend with the main Sects. I never imagined that we would be exterminated like this.”**

A chilling reminder that the attack on Lotus Pier was soon.

An attack that would actually succeed in almost exterminating a Sect. While Sect Leader Yao was in a poor state in this memory, many of the Yao disciples had fled instead of dying in battle. Given the smaller status of their Sect, it wasn’t too shameful for them to have fled.

The Yao Sect never stood a chance against the Wen Sect alone.

The Jiang Sect didn’t either, but no one knew that until it was over.

Until they died.

**“Just focus on healing first,” Jiang Fengmian soothed, “Since you’re already here, we, the YunmengJiang, will try our best to protect you.”**

**“Thank you very much, Jiang-zongzhu,” Sect Leader Yao cried.**

**“You’re welcome,” Jiang Fengmian rose, “Get a suite tidied and treat Yao-zongzhu’s wounds.”**

**The Jiang disciples bowed, “Understood.”**

**Wei Wuxian came up to them, “Jiang-shushu.”**

**“A-Die,” Jiang Cheng said, “Now that the Wen Sect has shown their fangs, I don’t think they will spare us so easily. As for Yao-zongzhu and his followers, I’m afraid Lotus Pier is not safe for them either.”**

**Jiang Fengmian stared forward, “I was just thinking about this. Wen Ruohan is rampantly slaughtering cultivation Sects. At this moment, I assume only the LanlingJin stand a chance. But the Jin Sect...”**

**“Jiang-shushu,” Wei Wuxian cut in, “Jin Zixuan is a somewhat decent person. Even if the Jin Sect doesn’t rebel against the Wen Sect officially, as long as they are on our side, I don’t believe that the Jin Sect will just sit there and watch the disciples of other Sects fall into the Wen Sect’s hands.”**

**Jiang Cheng nodded in agreement, “That’s right, A-Die. To rescue Wei Wuxian, I went to Lanling for reinforcements with Jin-gongzi.”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded this time.**

Jin Zixuan flushed at the praise, and the murmur of more compliments around the room.

Could they really have been friends? If he hadn’t been so bitter about his engagement, or sheltered in his childhood, could he have had what Nie Huaisang did with them?

He always considered his own contributions to the Sunshot Campaign so small. Compared to his peers, he’d done the bare minimum of showing up. Still, if it weren’t for him there wouldn’t have been anyone from the Jin Sect fighting at all.

But he couldn’t say that. It would undermine his father’s authority, and while he wasn’t sure he trusted his father with that much power, certainly it was better than throwing the cultivation world into further chaos. Right? His fingers twitched, and he wanted nothing more than to drag Nie Huaisang and Guangyao somewhere private to ask what he should do.

He clenched his hand into a fist. He wasn’t ready to be the Sect Leader. Was that what his father wanted? Guangyao couldn’t be Sect Leader while Jin Zixuan was able, so their father trusted him with more duties, more responsibilities.

Had he always feared Jin Zixuan would usurp him?

A-Li grabbed his clenched fist with a worried noise, and he didn't know how to begin to explain his thoughts. His father had always treated him well as long as he stayed out of his business. What would happen if he started taking a more active role in the Sect? If his father was capable of what Wei Wuxian accused him of...what would such a man do to his own son?

What had he already done to the son who had no mother to protect him?

**Jiang Fengmian took a few steps forward, "That being the case, I shall depart tomorrow and escort Yao-zongzhu to Lanling."**

**"A-Die, let me go with you," Jiang Cheng requested.**

**"No," Jiang Fengmian refused, "A-Cheng, A-Xian, you two shall stay and guard Lotus Pier."**

**Wei Wuxian bowed his head, "Yes, Jiang-shushu."**

**Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian made their way up one of the towers, "The journey to Lanling is dangerous. Why didn't A-Die take us?"**

**"Killing Xuanwu will be the Wen Sect's excuse to target us," Wei Wuxian replied, "Besides, if both of us leave, who will be responsible for Lotus Pier?" Wei Wuxian clapped his shoulder, "Take it easy. Jiang-shushu and Shijie will just spend a few days on the river to get there. They'll come back safe and sound."**

**"The Wen Sect is so vicious," Jiang Cheng growled, "That they've even exterminated a minor Sect like the Yao Sect who had no quarrel with them. How abominable."**

**"The Wen Sect is ruthless and lacks humanity," Wei Wuxian said calmly, "It isn't new for us, but they even targeted minor Sects like the Yao. I'm afraid more chaos will be incurred in the cultivation world." He glanced at his brother, "Jiang Cheng. We should come up with a plan. Once the Wen Sect comes to Lotus Pier, what should we do?"**

**"How will we deal with it?" Jiang Cheng asked, "I'll kill every last one of the underlings of the Wen Sect."**

**Wei Wuxian slowly turned away.**

That wasn't a plan.

No one said that out loud.

Between the two of them, Wei Wuxian was more likely to come up with a plan that would actually work. No offense to Jiang Wanyin's skills, but he was known for his prowess on the battlefield, not his strategy leading up to it. It was Wei Wuxian who was the genius.

The genius no one listened to. The genius Madam Yu would never put in charge of the defense of Lotus Pier, even if he was Head Disciple. Even if talismans were his speciality. If he could break through the Lan Sect's defenses with ease, then he could probably construct something to stop an army.

But Madam Yu hated him because of rumors they fueled for over a decade.

So Lotus Pier was left without its greatest defender and the Wen Sect didn't have to incapacitate him.

**It skipped ahead to Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian supervising the disciples shooting kites. Wei Wuxian was seated, and sighed, "Let's stop here. We should head back."**

**Jiang Cheng crossed his arms, "So early today?"**

**"I've had enough," Wei Wuxian leaned on his hand, "It's not interesting anymore." He sat up, "By the way, which of you guys were ranked at the bottom? Go fetch it with him."**

**One of the youngest disciples spoke up, "Da-shixiong, why am I always the one to fetch it? That's not fair."**

**Jiang Cheng snorted. Wei Wuxian replied, "I didn't want to either, but Madam Yu won't let me go out. She is home now. Maybe Jinzhu or Yinzhu is hiding in some corner spying on me and ready to report me at any time. If I go out, Madam Yu will whip me until a layer of my skin falls off."**

**"Da-shixiong, you fear nothing but our Madam Yu," The young disciple glanced at the rest of the group, who chorused, "And dogs."**

**"They say it so casually," Lan Wangji commented angrily.**

They spoke of his abuse as though it were the weather. It was such common knowledge. It was normal in the former Jiang Sect for Wei Ying to constantly live in fear of Madam Yu.

**"Said," Uncle corrected, "This is in the past, Wangji."**

His tone implied there was no reason to get angry.

**"The past shapes the present," He reminded, "The present the future."**

It should be acknowledged that Wei Ying's home allowed him to be mistreated. They let him take the blame unjustly, simply because Madam Yu was the authority.

Just as it should be acknowledged that the cultivation world now allowed Wei Ying to be mistreated. They forced him into the Burial Mounds. All because the current authority said so.

Abuse should never be normalized.

**Wei Wuxian rose, “Hey! You...” The disciples started laughing.**

**“What are you guys talking about?” Jiang Cheng snapped, “Go and retrieve the arrows now!”**

**They ran off.**

**“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian turned around, “Jiang-shushu and Shijie have been away for about ten days. When will they be back?”**

**“I received a letter from A-Die several days ago,” Jiang Cheng said, “I guess they’ll be back soon. I’m just wondering if we should consult with A-Niang to send people to greet them. After such a long time, I wonder if she’s mollified.”**

**Wei Wuxian sighed, “If only I could go out.”**

**If only he weren’t so restricted back then.**

**Maybe things could have been different.**

**Whose fault was it then? Theirs, for perpetuating a rumor that caused the mistreatment of Wei Wuxian at Madam Yu’s hands? Wei Wuxian’s, for not valuing his Sect above what was morally right? Could they pin the blame on the Wen Sect for attacking, if their attacks wouldn’t have been as successful without the rest of them weakening them beforehand?**

**They only just made it back inside when the disciples came running back, “Da-shixiong, bad news!”**

**“Sixth-shidi was captured!” One reported quickly.**

**“By who and why?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**“I don’t know why he was captured.”**

**“Capturing people for no reason?” Jiang Cheng snapped.**

**“Calm down and make it clear,” Wei Wuxian ordered.**

**“We just went to fetch the kites,” The disciple said, “The kite fell. It was kind of far away. We went for it and found dozens of people. They were all from the Wen Sect. The leader was a young woman. She was holding a kite with an arrow.”**

**“She asked who owned the kite when she saw us.” Jiang Cheng sighed as another continued explaining, “Sixth-shidi said it was his. The woman got angry and said ‘How dare you!’. Then they seized sixth-shidi.”**

**“And then?” Wei Wuxian prompted.**

**“We asked for the reason,” The first took over, “She was yelling repeatedly that he was conspiring against them and ordered her men to seize Sixth-shidi.”**

**“Kidnapping for no reason,” Jiang Cheng scowled, “The Wen Sect is getting out of control.”**

**The disciples agreed.**

This was it.

The moment where the cultivation world changed. The act that forced them all to react.

This marked the beginning of the Sunshot Campaign.

In retrospect, it shouldn't have surprised any of them. Watching the buildup to war, they could see that the Wen Sect had always been so bold. Even when they found out about the Yin Iron, and the atrocities he committed with them, it took the destruction of the Jiang Sect for any of them to take action.

They nearly waited too long.

And yet...none of them could think of similar actions by the Yiling Patriarch. Certainly, he already had the Stygian Tiger Amulet, but if he were like Wen Ruohan he would have sent agents to find Xue Yang. If Yin Iron attracted Yin Iron, he should have been able to locate him with no trouble. Yet there was no alliance there.

It was obvious they should have acted much sooner with Wen Ruohan and the Wen Sect.

In comparison, it was as though they acted too soon with the Yiling Patriarch and the Wen Remnants.

No, they couldn't be that wrong. He killed those at Qiongqi Pass. He resurrected the Ghost General, raised a corpse outside of war. He turned his back on tradition. He chose to be a heretic and it was better to act now than to wait for him to become more powerful.

**“Quiet,” Wei Wuxian ordered, “The Wen Sect is coming. Don't let them get the best of us. Let me ask you, was the woman carrying no sword, looks flirtatious, and has a mole on her face?”**

**“That's her!”**

**“Wang Lingjiao,” Jiang Cheng spat, “Wang Lingjiao is such a-”**

**“What are you shouting about?” Madam Yu demanded, interrupting their discussion. She glared them all into submission, “Can't I have a peaceful life for one day?”**

**“A-Niang, the Wen Sect is coming and they captured Sixth-shidi,” Jiang Cheng informed her.**

**“You yelled so loudly I already heard inside,” Madam Yu looked at him, “What is the fuss about? He was captured, not killed. Look at you. So anxious and resentful you even stomped the ground. Do you have any blood of a future Sect Leader?” Scolded, Jiang Cheng looked down, “Calm down.”**



**“The so-called Lotus Pier is overrated,” Wang Lingjiao called out as she arrived. The disciples quickly moved behind Madam Yu, who glared at the new arrival, “Madam Yu, long time no see.”**

Lan Qiren stroked his beard.

They sent Wang Lingjiao first. He half-expected Wen Chao to storm in with his demands, but the coward would of course hide behind his underlings rather than risk Wei Wuxian’s sword at his throat again.

Wang Lingjiao was also the best choice to provoke Madam Yu. If it had been Jiang Fengmian...nothing that young woman could have said would have made the former Sect Leader so much as flinch. The question then became what they wanted to provoke Madam Yu into doing. The Violet Spider wasn’t foolish enough to declare war because she felt insulted.

Wangji was tense beside him. Xichen at least tried to relax.

For the sake of his nephew, he hoped whatever happened to Wei Wuxian was unavoidable.

Otherwise he wasn’t sure he and Xichen would be enough to keep Wangji from fighting Jiang Wanyin.

**They moved the discussion into Sword Hall. Wang Lingjiao looked around, “Lotus Pier looks pretty good. It’s just that the wood is kind of dark. They’re not bright enough. Madam Yu, I must say, you are an awful mother who knows so little about decoration. Here, here, and here, if there was some red gauze it would look pretty.”**

**Wei Wuxian jerked forward when Wang Lingjiao sat herself on the Lotus Throne. Madam Yu remained calm, “Why did you seize the disciple of YunmengJiang?”**

**“Seize? You are referring to the one I just caught outside,” She leaned forward, “It’s a long story. Let’s have a good talk. Where is the tea?”**

**“There won’t be any,” Jinzhu replied, “If you don’t get it yourself.”**

**“Don’t the servants of the Jiang Sect do their work?” Wang Lingjiao asked.**

**“They have more important work to do,” Yinzhu stated, “Doing such a trivial matter, you won’t need others’ help.” She crossed her arms, “If you’re a healthy person.”**

**“Madam Yu,” Wang Lingjiao’s smile disappeared, “This is not good for the Jiang Sect. Servants can interrupt others in such a public situation. If this happened in the Wen Sect, such behavior would merit being slapped in the face.”**

**“Jinzhu and Yinzhu are not some normal servants,” Madam Yu said, “They’ve been serving me since they were little. No one can slap them. No one can and no one dares.”**

**“Listen to what you’ve said, Madam Yu,” Wang Lingjiao warned, “In the cultivation world, superiors and inferiors must be differentiated or it will be chaotic. Servants are servants after all.”**

**“Right, servants should act as servants,” Madam Yu agreed with a glance at Wei Wuxian.**

Servants.

What an unsubtle way to bring up Wei Wuxian.

Nie Mingjue grimaced. What made it worse was that Madam Yu was obviously close to her two attendants. They had been with her since childhood. She didn’t ask them to demean themselves for propriety. Yet none of that carried over to Wei Wuxian, who was the son of a servant being raised with her son.

It proved it was solely because of the rumors of Wei Wuxian’s true parentage that he was scorned. It wasn’t a matter of rank or propriety, or Madam Yu wouldn’t treat Jinzhu and Yinzhu so well.

“What’s so bad about equality?” Huaisang muttered under his breath, “Would we really have chaos if birth didn’t matter?”

Lady Luo sighed, “People in power don’t want to share it. They wouldn’t feel safe without it.”

“They wouldn’t feel necessary without it,” His little brother corrected.

“We are necessary,” Nie Mingjue murmured.

“Only because we hoard resources,” Huaisang shook his head.

Which was...accurate, but what could they do? Unless every powerful Sect decided to share their resources instead of pooling them, then all they’d do was leave the selfish with more power. It was too risky.

**“However, why did you seize our disciple?” Madam Yu got the conversation back on track.**

**“Madam Yu, I advise you to draw a clear boundary with that boy,” Wang Lingjiao also glanced at Wei Wuxian, “He was conspiring against us and was caught by me on site.”**

**“Conspiring against you?” Madam Yu repeated.**

**“What can Sixth-shidi conspire about?” Jiang Cheng demanded.**

**Wang Lingjiao scoffed, “Come on, let’s show Madam Yu.” They brought forward a kit, “This is proof.”**

**Wei Wuxian scoffed this time, placing his hands on his hips, “What kind of proof is this? It’s just a kite with a one-eyed monster on it.”**

**Wang Lingjiao rose, “Do you think I’m blind?” She snatched the kite, “Observe it! What’s the color of it? And what’s the shape of the one-eyed monster?” She threw it to**

**the floor.**

**“So?” Madam Yu asked.**

**“So, Madam Yu,” Wang Lingjiao moved even closer, “What looks round and golden? The sun. There are so many kinds of kites. Why did he choose to draw a one-eyed monster? Why did he choose to make it gold? Why not other shapes? Why not other colors? You want to tell me it’s a coincidence? Impossible. He meant it.”**

**“He shot down the kite to insinuate he wanted to shoot down the sun. His desire to shoot down the sun is the biggest disrespect to the QishanWen,” She contrived, “Couldn’t I say he was conspiring against us?”**

**“The kite does look round and golden,” Jiang Cheng argued, “But it is far from the sun. What’s the resemblance?”**

**“So are you saying that oranges shouldn’t be eaten anymore?” Wei Wuxian wondered, crossing his arms, “Oranges are golden and round. But I remember that you like oranges.” He laughed.**

**“Ridiculous.”**

Su She didn’t think so. Going after the youngest disciple was a sure way to get Wei Wuxian to act. Wen Chao and Wang Lingjiao just didn’t know that Wei Wuxian would never act like the hero in front of Madam Yu.

If Madam Yu weren’t there, this already would have been a fight.

He had half-hoped the Jiang Sect would be a little more prepared than the Lan Sect had been for a battle. They were never quite as arrogant as the other Major Sects.

But there was no escaping the Wen Sect’s desire for power.

They should have just submitted.

**“So you came this time just for a kite?” Madam Yu asked.**

**“Of course not,” Wang Lingjiao gave up on that line of accusation and walked towards Wei Wuxian, “We came under Wen-gongzi’s orders to penalize a person.” She faced him, “This guy, back in Muxi Mountain, railed against our Wen-gongzi and hindered him when he was fighting a monster dauntlessly, which made Wen-gongzi tired and distracted so he almost failed.”**

**She laughed, “He even lost his sword.” She turned away, “But our gongzi is blessed to have killed that monster at last, even without a sword. I, on behalf of Wen-gongzi, am asking Madam Yu to penalize this guy to set an example for the other people in the Jiang Sect.”**

**Jiang Cheng inhaled sharply, “A-Niang.”**

MianMian grabbed Nie Huaisang's hand.

"She's dead," She whispered, unsure if she meant Wang Lingjiao or Madam Yu.

Her friend just nodded.

It hurt to be right, and she pitied Jiang Wanyin and Jiang Yanli. The former had to stand there and watch his mother beat his brother to the point where he was useless in a fight. From what they'd seen...it took a lot to incapacitate him. The latter may not have known this happened. From what she remembered about Jiang Wanyin, he didn't talk when he was upset.

Wei Wuxian definitely wouldn't tell her.

"He's so easy to love," Nie Huaisang whispered, "If she'd just taken a moment to really look at him..."

"I know," She squeezed his hand, "He'll have a family when this is over."

They couldn't change the past, but they could make his present and future better.

**"Back off," Madam Yu spat.**

**"This Wei Ying should be your servant in the Jiang Sect, right?" Wang Lingjiao asked, "Considering Jiang-zongzhu's absence, I suppose Madam Yu can be the judge. If there is anyone shielding him in the Jiang Sect, I can assume those old rumors..." She let out a cruel laugh, "Are real."**

**"What rumors?" Jiang Cheng demanded.**

**"You know, don't you?" Wang Lingjiao looked away, "They're nothing but some romantic affairs of Jiang-zongzhu."**

**"You mean-" Wei Wuxian stepped forward angrily, ready to make good on his earlier promise of fighting anyone who spoke of those rumors.**

**As soon as he stepped away from Jiang Cheng, Madam Yu struck him with Zidian.**

If Jiang Yanli didn't have her son in her arms, she would have collapsed.

"A-Li," Her husband took their son.

"A-Jie," Her brother was suddenly there. He probably started moving as soon as they got to this part. His hand settled on her shoulder, "He could walk after. If A-Niang had truly wanted to..."

She could have made the pain unbearable, even for A-Xian's standards. Maybe they'd never have made it back to Lotus Pier at all if A-Xian was unable to stand up and help row the boat back. Still, it was hard to believe him. A-Xian was capable of so much if he felt he needed to, and what greater motivator was there than the attack on their home?

She gripped her younger brother's hand, willing him to stay, "Why didn't you tell me?"

A-Cheng avoided her gaze, "There are many things I haven't told you."

He was ashamed. More than just the shame of their mother's actions.

"Are any of them...?" She trailed off. Was there something he did that convinced A-Xian they couldn't be trusted?

"I don't know," A-Cheng grimaced.

**"A-Niang," Jiang Cheng moved between them again.**

**"Move aside, A-Cheng," Madam Yu ordered. Her son didn't move, so she continued, "Or you'll kneel down too."**

**Wei Wuxian pushed at his leg, "Jiang Cheng, stay out of this."**

**The next strike hit him across the chest, flinging him back onto a table. Jiang Cheng hurried to his side, and had to be dragged back by Madam Yu's attendants.**

**"I've already said it," Madam Yu spat, "You undisciplined bastard. You're going to bring trouble to the Jiang Sect sooner or later." She beat him again, and Wei Wuxian rolled onto his stomach. He tried to rise, but the next hit flattened him. He spat blood, and tried to rise again, only to get the same result. Still, he tried to rise once more.**

**Only to be beaten down.**

"I hope you are all proud of yourselves," Nie Huaisang scowled behind his fan.

They blamed Wei Wuxian for everything. From childhood, all the problems between Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu were blamed on him. She got so used to using him as a scapegoat that she blamed him for the Wen attack.

MianMian kept holding his hand, and he focused on that.

They needed to recognize that they had to think about rumors before they believed them or spread them, otherwise Wei Wuxian was doomed.

Given how many flinched at his words, they might have a chance.

**Jiang Cheng freed himself and knelt, placing himself between his mother and Wei Wuxian, "Stop," He begged, "Please stop, A-Niang."**

**"Jiang Cheng, get away from him," Madam Yu commanded.**

**Jiang Cheng didn't move until he was dragged away again.**

**"Done already?" Wang Lingjiao inquired innocently.**

**"So what?" Madam Yu demanded.**

**“This is it?” Wang Lingjiao looked at the injured young man.**

**“What do you mean?” Madam Yu snarled, “What class do you think my Zidian is? Having taken that, he won’t be able to get up until next month. He’ll suffer.”**

“She lied.”

Or she underestimated Wei Wuxian’s pain tolerance.

Jiang Cheng didn’t know which he believed. He wanted to think some small part of his mother cared about what was right.

“That doesn’t make her actions right,” Hanguang-Jun snapped.

Did right and wrong even matter at that point? There was only survival and death. The Wen Sect was there. The Jiang Sect was unprepared. The other Sects weren’t prepared to come to their aide. Hw already let Wei Wuxian go to protect the Jiang Sect. He ran him through with his sword just to make it look authentic.

Still, even in that farce of a fight, he wasn’t able to use Zidian against him. Even in a controlled way.

Jiang Cheng closed his eyes. He’d always promised himself he would be different. That when he was old enough to be Sect Leader, he wouldn’t make the same mistakes as his parents. Yet as he watched them all over again, he could see that he’d failed in that as well.

He called Wei Wuxian an oathbreaker, but really, who betrayed who first?

**“But he will heal one day, right?” Wang Lingjiao asked.**

**“What on earth do you want?” Jiang Cheng shouted.**

**“Madam Yu, since this is a penalty, you should make him remember the lesson,” Wang Lingjiao said, “Regret it for the rest of his life, and lose the nerve to do it again. Just a few lashes. Very soon, he’ll heal and fool around again. What kind of penalty is that? Besides, lads at such a young age easily forget the pain once they heal.”**

**Wang Lingjiao sighed, “This is nothing close to a penalty.”**

**“What do you want then?” Madam Yu demanded, “Chop off his legs to make him stay down forever?”**

**“For Wen-gongzi’s sake, we won’t do brutal things like chopping off someone’s legs,” Wang Lingjiao simpered, “You only need to chop off his right hand. That should satisfy Wen-gongzi.”**

**“Chop off his right hand?” Madam Yu clarified.**

**“That’s right,” Wang Lingjiao confirmed.**

Lan Xichen grabbed his brother's sword and moved it out of his reach. It wouldn't stop him from summoning it instinctively, but maybe keeping it out of sight would keep it out of mind.

Why couldn't the enemy just demand the Yin Iron sword? Why did they have to torture Wei Wuxian like this? His heart ached for Wei Wuxian, who was beaten for doing the right thing, for saving Wangji and the others. His heart broke Jiang Wanyin, who kept breaking free to try and defend his brother.

This was everything he feared for Wangji. That his younger brother would cross a line for Wei Wuxian, and Uncle would use a more severe punishment than simply kneeling.

What would he do, if they demanded Wangji be struck with the discipline whip? As Sect Leader, he needed to be present for such a severe punishment. As Sect Leader, he couldn't overrule the elder's decision because the person in need of correction was his younger brother.

Would his disciple's have to restrain him to keep him from interfering? Would he earn his own punishment for appearing indecorous in public? Would he foster the same anger Jiang Wanyin carried in his heart forever? Anger at his elders, anger at his peers, anger at the way things were that kept having good people suffer while the true evil flourished.

**Madam Yu turned to Wei Wuxian, considering the terms. Jiang Cheng fought his way free again and threw himself between them, "A-Niang, please don't. She's lying."**

**"Madam Yu, you'd better think it over," Wang Lingjiao warned, "We, the Qishan Wen, won't quit before there is a decent result. I'll bring back the hand you chop off. With that result, the YunmengJiang will be fine. It won't be so simple when Wen-gongzi comes in person."**

**Madam Yu sighed, "Jinzhu, Yinzhu. Close the doors. Don't let blood be shown to the others."**

**"Yes, Madam," The attendants obeyed.**

**"A-Niang," Jiang Cheng clutched her arm, "A-Niang. A-Niang!"**

**" Well then, " Wei Wuxian thought, " If it can bring the peace back, one hand is worthwhile."**

**"A-Niang," Jiang Cheng continued to plead.**

**" I must practice using my left hand from now on, " Wei Wuxian relaxed.**

**"Would he really let her do that?" Jin Zixuan asked.**

His wife just nodded, her eyes watching the scene. Jin Zixuan, however, kept glancing towards Guangyao. His brother looked a little paler, and he wondered how terrifying this was to him. His and Wei Wuxian's positions were all too similar. If his mother had her way, would she beat him so? Would she permanently disfigure him?

Would he just take it?

No. Guangyao wasn't so self-sacrificial. He'd already proved he was willing to kill to protect himself, and lie to protect his Sect. Though he needed to remember that the Nie Sect, at least Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang, treated him far better than anyone in the Jin Sect. Guangyao wasn't a man to lie there and take it.

But there were other ways to destroy oneself that weren't physical. Maybe it wasn't a question of what would Guangyao take for the Jin Sect, but what he would do because their father asked it of him?

"We should take a break soon," Jin Zixuan turned towards Nie Huaisang when he said that.

Nie Huaisang blinked, his suggestion drawing him from his fury, "I want to see where Weixiong went."

"I do too," His wife whispered.

Maybe he should start keeping a list of all the questions he had for the people around him he couldn't ask in public.

**Wang Lingjiao clapped, "Madam Yu, I'm starting to adore you. We'll get along well in the Supervisory Office in the future."**

**That grabbed Madam Yu's attention, "The Supervisory Office?"**

**"Yes, the Supervisory Office," Wang Lingjiao repeated, "It's my second errand in Yunmeng."**

**With his mother distracted, Jiang Cheng pulled Wei Wuxian closer to him.**

**"We, the Wen Sect, have newly issued a Supervisory Order," Wang Lingjiao continued, "One supervisory office for every city." She rose from the throne, "Now I declare Lotus Pier as the new Supervisory Office of the Wen Sect in Yunmeng."**

Nie Huaisang let out a breath of relief.

Madam Yu would have maimed Wei Wuxian if they asked, but she would never submit to letting Lotus Pier become a Supervisory Office. This was the one advantage of sending Wang Lingjiao. She didn't seem to know about the Yin Iron. She probably thought this whole thing was about punishing Wei Wuxian and taking over Lotus Pier.

He probably should feel guilty about the relief coursing through him. Everyone else except Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were going to die.

But they would die honorable deaths defending their home. It was a massacre, quick deaths all around.

Nothing like the torture they planned to put Wei Wuxian through.



Or potentially still would put him through, if that was where he disappeared to.

**“What are you saying?” Jiang Cheng demanded, “This is my home!”**

**“Madam Yu,” Wang Lingjiao walked down the steps, “I advise you to discipline your son properly. For hundreds of years, all other Sects should kneel before the Wen Sect. In the presence of the Wen emissary, how could you say something like that? I thought Lotus Pier was old and had some traitors, and therefore not worthy to take responsibility.”**

**“However, I can see you are obedient,” Wang Lingjiao taunted, “And I like your temper. So I decided to grant you the right-”**

**Madam Yu stopped her with a backhand to the face. Wang Lingjiao fell to the floor, “You reckless maid.” The Wen disciples drew their swords, but Madam Yu drew Zidian and threw them all back.**

“Finally,” Chifeng-Zun growled.

Around the room, people bent their heads together and whispered.

Nothing was ever as clear and simple as it seemed. The near destruction of the Jiang Sect...it was tempting to blame it all on the Wen Sect. But there were a million small decisions leading to the final event.

They could have done something about the Wen Sect sooner. Watching Jiang Wanyin cry, and Wei Wuxian submit, reminded everyone that they were young. It shouldn't have been their responsibility to win a war. They should have made Wen Ruohan face consequences for his thinly veiled murder of the former Nie Sect Leader.

He should only have destroyed one minor Sect.

They could have looked into the rumors of Wei Wuxian's birth. It was obvious, once Nie Huaisang said, that his parents loved each other. Jiang Fengmian's feelings alone didn't create a child. Even if Madam Yu still suspected, she wasn't foolish enough to endure that belief alone. Maybe she would have seen a poor orphan instead of a threat.

Then Wei Wuxian wouldn't have to hide his skills. He could have been free to set whatever defenses he wanted. He could have been the one to confront Wang Lingjiao in the woods. Maybe it wouldn't have changed anything.

Maybe it would have changed everything.

They'd never know, and that haunted too many people.

**She bent down and choked Wang Lingjiao, “You should look at the owner before you kick a dog. How dare you barge into my house and penalize my family members before me? Who do you think you are? How can you be so impertinent?” She slapped her again.**

**“How dare you!” Wang Lingjiao shouted, “I’m telling you, the Wen Sect and Wang Sect won’t spare you!”**

**That earned her another slap, “Shut up! You mean maid.” She pushed her away, “The MeishanYu have existed in the cultivation world for a hundred years. I never heard of some YingchuanWang. Which filthy gutter did you come from? Such a low Sect. Is the whole Sect full of low beings like you?”**

**“You dare to bring up superiors and inferiors,” She thundered, “Let me tell you what superiors and inferiors are. I’m superior.” She stepped on Wang Lingjiao’s head, “You’re inferior.”**

**Madam Yu released her and nodded to her attendants, who made quick work of the Wen disciples.**

They lost.

Nie Mingjue had to remind himself that. The only reason everyone agreed to join the Sunshot Campaign was because the Jiang Sect lost.

He glanced worriedly at his brother. Now that Wei Wuxian wasn’t being beaten, he lost his vice grip on Lady Luo’s hand. But there was still that lingering anger and...dread. This wasn’t over. Not by a long shot.

Wei Wuxian submitted here, but he wasn’t broken.

He wasn’t desperate enough to use demonic cultivation, and it wasn’t because of the risk to himself. He was just willing to let his arm be cut off for the Jiang Sect’s safety. Even if it damaged his body, his cultivation, how it affected him didn’t figure into his calculations. So he must have known demonic cultivation was dangerous to others.

Wei Wuxian knew it was a possibility, knew it could work, but didn’t want to lose control.

Huaisang wanted to see where he disappeared to. Nie Mingjue wondered whether he disappeared or went into hiding to control his new power.

**Wang Lingjiao backed away, “Do you think you can bury the truth by killing me? Do you think Wen-gongzi doesn’t know I’m here? Let me tell you, Wen-gongzi will be here soon. You! He won’t spare any of you!”**

**“You’re talking like you’re sparing us right now,” Jinzhu sneered.**

**“Do you know that I am one of Wen-gongzi’s people?” Wang Lingjiao screamed, “I’m the closest to him! If he finds out what you did to me, he will absolutely-”**

**“So what?” Madam Yu snapped, “Chop off our hands or legs? Burn down our mansion? Send out an army of ten thousand people to reduce our Lotus Pier to ruins? Or set up the Supervisory Office?” She nodded to her attendants, who moved towards Wang Lingjiao.**

**“Wen Zhuliu!” Wang Lingjiao screamed, “Wen Zhuliu! Save me!”**

**The man came out of hiding and faced off against Madam Yu.**

Two of the most powerful cultivators of their time.

They were well-matched. Wen Zhuliu’s skill was best used in close quarters, while Madam Yu’s spiritual weapon worked best for mid-distance.

They all knew Madam Yu would lose, but still...

What a fight.

**“Core-melting Hand?” Madam Yu snapped.**

**“Violet Spider,” Wen Zhuliu addressed.**

**“Wen Zhuliu, what are you waiting for?” Wang Lingjiao demanded, “Kill her!”**

**Madam Yu humphed, “Your original name was Zhao Zhuliu, right? It wasn’t Wen. So you desperately want to change your surname. You guys fall over yourselves to get it. How can the surname Wen be so precious that it made you betray your ancestors? Hilarious.”**

**“I’m just serving my Master,” Wen Zhuliu replied.**

Now that was loyalty.

Jin Guangshan saw what Wei Wuxian could have been, if only Jiang Wanyin held his leash tighter. This was what Guangyao could be if he let go of his ambitions.

Someone willing to do anything for their Master.

Wen Ruohan wasted Wen Zhuliu in following Wen Chao around.

**“Wen Zhuliu,” Wang Lingjiao got to her feet and clutched him, “Why are you still talking? Can’t you see the situation I’m in? Wen-gongzi sent you to protect me. Is this how you’ll do that? You’d better be careful. I’ll report you!”**

**Wen Zhuliu saluted, “Forgive my offense.”**

**“How hypocritical,” Madam Yu activated Zidian.**

**They began to fight. Wen Zhuliu was able to catch Zidian, allowing Wang Lingjiao to retreat.**

**“Jiang Cheng! Stop her!” Wei Wuxian pushed himself up, “Stop her from setting off the signal!”**

**Jiang Cheng struck her, but before he could hit her again, Wei Wuxian called out a warning to Madam Yu. He turned back, “A-Niang!” He arrived just in time to stop his**

**mother from getting hit, taking the hit himself.**

**Wang Lingjiao fired off the signal.**

Caring wasn't a weakness.

Lan Xichen reminded himself that. Seeing the best in others, caring about everyone, that was his strength. It was perhaps his greatest strength.

But he finally understood why so many couldn't care about others. He thought it was selfishness that brought apathy, but he never saw how painful it was to watch his loved ones suffer simply because of love.

Wangji suffered in the cave because he couldn't leave Wei Wuxian behind.

Jiang Wanyin lost his entire Sect because he couldn't let his mother lose her core.

If he lost everything, truly lost everything...would he still laud compassion as a strength?

**Jinzhu and Yinzhu took over attacking Wen Zhuliu.**

**Madam Yu grabbed Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng and flew them over the walls. She landed on their back pier and shoved the two into a boat. She knelt, "A-Cheng." She checked his spiritual energy, "Thank heavens, the wound is not severe."**

**"A-Niang," Jiang Cheng bowed his head, "What should we do?"**

**"What should you do?" Madam Yu asked back, "Don't you see that they are prepared? The fight today is inevitable. Many pursuers will arrive soon. You go first."**

**"What if Shijie and Jiang-shushu-" Wei Wuxian began.**

**"You shut up!" Madam Yu interrupted, "It's all your fault!"**

**Wei Wuxian ducked his head.**

"I hate her so much," Nie Huaisang whispered.

MianMian agreed. What a terrible thing to say to a young man who was already suffering.

Was that why he didn't explain anything to anyone? Was all this...saving the Wen Remnants, disavowing the Jiang Sect, exiling himself to the Burial Mounds...was it all some convoluted punishment? Did his downward spiral all come from this?

As soon as he got revenge, did all that anger and hatred turn inwards?

**Madam Yu transferred Zidian to Jiang Cheng, "A-Niang, why did you give me Zidian?"**

**"It's yours now," Madam Yu said soberly, "The Zidian has accepted you as its Master."**

**Jiang Cheng started to cry, “A-Niang. Can’t you go with us?”**

**She touched his face gently, then pulled him to her chest in a hug. It didn’t last long before she pushed him away and grabbed Wei Wuxian, “You damn boy. I hate you so much! Look! Because of you, what disaster has come to our Sect?” She shoved him down, then turned to leave.**

**Jiang Cheng grabbed her, “A-Niang, can’t you go with us?”**

**She ripped herself free.**

**Jiang Cheng rose, “A-Niang!”**

**Zidian activated and wrapped the two of them together. Jiang Cheng continued to call for his mother.**

**“It’ll loosen when it’s safe,” Madam Yu told them, “If you encounter any enemy, the Zidian will protect you. Listen up, Wei Ying!” She raised her voice, “Protect Jiang Cheng with your own life, okay?”**

**“Madam Yu!” Wei Wuxian finally called out.**

**“Stop wasting time! Do you understand it or not?” Madam Yu demanded.**

**Wei Wuxian nodded.**

**“He didn’t mean to break his promise,” Jiang Yanli suddenly understood.**

**“What?” A-Cheng asked.**

**“His promise to you, to stand by your side,” She would not say serve him. A-Xian wasn’t and never would be a servant. He was their brother and equal, “It wasn’t as important as protecting you.”**

**A vow he made to their mother. A vow he felt he needed to keep because she blamed him for her death.**

**“I never asked for this,” A-Cheng closed his eyes, likely to avoid crying in public.**

**She hummed in sympathy. It would take time to undo all the damage their mother, and the war, did to A-Xian. He went from being a servant to being a weapon, and now everyone regarded him as a villain. For all his confidence, he could never fully ignore their insults.**

**As long as the person meant something to him, he carried their words in his heart.**

**Both the kind words and those spoken in anger. She wondered if the resentment he carried now made him deaf to their previous kindness. Did those tortured, angry souls speak of their own anguish or did they reach inside him and force him to listen to his own? She steeled herself to her Sect’s destruction.**

They just had to endure, then they could help A-Xian.

**“A-Niang. A-Die isn’t home yet. There is nothing we can’t share together!” Jiang Cheng pleaded.**

**“It’s okay even if he doesn’t return,” Madam Yu insisted, “Even without him, I’ll be fine.”**

**With that, she kicked the boat away and sent out a talisman to keep it going. Jiang Cheng continued to struggle and call out for his mother, while Wei Wuxian sat silently.**

**It was later in the day when their boat encountered Jiang Fengmian’s. Jiang Cheng was still struggling, but Wei Wuxian noticed it when he looked away, “Jiang Cheng! Look! It’s Jiang-shushu and Shijie!” He raised his voice, “Jiang-shushu!”**

**“A-Die!” Jiang Cheng shouted.**

**Jiang Yanli was the one to notice, “A-Die. It sounds like A-Xian and A-Cheng.”**

**“Quickly, pull up to the boat!” Jiang Fengmian ordered.**

**When their boats met, Jiang Fengmian ran over, “A-Cheng. A-Xian. This is...”**

**“Jiang-shushu,” Wei Wuxian trailed off.**

**“A-Die,” Jiang Cheng added worriedly.**

**“Why are you bound by the Zidian?” Jiang Fengmian demanded.**

**“Where is A-Niang?” Jiang Yanli asked, “Why did she bind you?”**

**“A-Die, set us free,” Jiang Cheng begged.**

**Jiang Fengmian hesitantly knelt, “Zidian belongs to your mother. It can recognize its owner. I’m afraid it won’t let me...” But it did, retracting onto his wrist at a touch.**

**Madam Jin inhaled sharply.**

**“Does that mean...?” Her son trailed off.**

**“She loved him,” Madam Jin confirmed. She’d always known that. It was what made her sworn sister’s situation so much more painful. She’d loved Jiang Fengmian, but when they were wed he was still trying to get over Cangse Sanren.**

**Or so the rumors said.**

**“So they could have been happy if not for everyone,” Nie Huaisang commented, his tone light but his expression barely disguising his rage.**

**It was always so easy to forget he was a Nie.**

Though he did have a point. The rumors made Ziyuan believe their situations were more alike than they truly were. She thought Jiang Fengmian was as disloyal as Guangshan. She believed Wei Wuxian was a bastard because Madam Jin dealt with so many bastards. They could have been happy if their gossip was kinder.

**Free of its constraints, the two young men rose, “A-Die. A-Jie. The Wen Sect barged into our home. Mother quarreled with them and started to fight Core-melting Hand. I fear he will get the upper hand and someone just set off the signal. It won’t be long before more enemies arrive. A-Die, Let’s get back to help her! Let’s go back now!”**

**“Core-Melting Hand...” Jiang Fengmian considered the information.**

**“A-Die,” Jiang Yanli grabbed his arm, “Let’s go back now.”**

**Jiang Fengmian pushed her towards her brothers and bound them all with Zidian, “Listen, all three of you. Don’t change your direction. Don’t go back to Lotus Pier. Try to get to Meishan once you land. Go to your grandmother.”**

**All three of them protested.**

**“Foolish.”**

But given what they’d all seen of this family, completely expected.

They were all willing to die for each other.

**“I will go back for my wife,” Jiang Fengmian continued.**

**“A-Die. Let’s go back to A-Niang together!” Jiang Cheng offered.**

**“You three must be safe and sound,” Jiang Fengmian decided, turning to leave.**

**“If something happened to you, we wouldn’t be safe and sound either!” Wei Wuxian shouted.**

**Jiang Fengmian turned back. He approached his children. As his wife did, he tenderly touched Jiang Cheng’s cheek, “Little fool. Don’t cry.” He scolded gently, “I didn’t say that I wouldn’t be back.” He then moved on to his daughter, “A-Li, don’t cry now. Don’t cry now.”**

**Then he moved to Wei Wuxian, “A-Xian.” He placed a hand on his shoulder, “You must always watch over A-Cheng and A-Li.” Wei Wuxian bowed his head.**

**They all called out to him as he left, and he didn’t look at them again.**

Jin Guangyao wasn’t expecting this.

It was like being kicked down the steps of Koi Tower again. He’d expected Madam Yu to incapacitate Wei Wuxian. He expected her harsh words. Surely it was too much to have her

heart soften just because they were in mortal peril. He knew what Madam Jin was like, so he wasn't surprised at the stark difference between Jiang Wanyin's goodbye and Wei Wuxian's.

The difference in Jiang Fengmian's...

"A-Yao?" Er-ge must have realized he wasn't breathing.

He forced himself to exhale, "He was always a servant."

"What?" Hanguang-Jun asked sharply.

"The others..." He couldn't manage to address them properly, "They got farewells. Wei Wuxian got orders."

Not just orders, the same order as Madam Yu. Protect the other two. Always.

Jin Guangyao should have suspected when Jiang Fengmian allowed Wei Wuxian to go to Indoctrination, but he dismissed the idea as just the general underestimation of the Wen Sect. To know now that all of Jiang Fengmian's apparent favor, all of his love for Wei Wuxian would never hold a candle to his love for his own children?

It would take him some time to sort through how he felt about that, but it wasn't going to lead him anywhere good.

**The sun was setting when Zidian finally withdrew. Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng were still crying. As soon as they were free they searched the boat for an oar. Finding none, Wei Wuxian ripped the board off the bench and started using it to paddle. Slowly, they made their way back to Lotus Pier.**

**It was night when they hid the boat. Left behind, a talisman fell from Jiang Yanli's robes. It cracked on a rock, and she turned in the direction of Lotus Pier.**

Lan Qiren wasn't a superstitious man, but this had to be when Jiang Fengmian died.

There was truly nothing they could do to rescue him.

Going back to Lotus Pier would only bring them pain.

**Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian, meanwhile, reached the front entrance. There was no sound of a fight, but the gates were closed. Jiang Cheng made to enter, but Wei Wuxian held him back, "We can't go this way." He grabbed his arm, "To the back door."**

**They climbed over the roof to get a view of the courtyard. They watched as the Wen disciples laid out the body of their Sect brothers and sisters. No one was spared, not even the youngest shidi.**

**"Do you see A-Niang and A-Die?" Jiang Cheng asked, "They'll be okay."**

**Wen Zhuliu began to turn around, but Wei Wuxian forced them both to duck down.**



**They crawled to a different roof, where they could see Wen Chao and Wang Lingjiao on the Lotus Throne. They were talking, but the words were indistinguishable.**

**Jiang Cheng started crying, as did Wei Wuxian as they saw Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian's corpses, holding hands on the ground before them.**

"Maybe they reconciled?" Jin Zixuan asked.

In all the what ifs, it was the first pleasant one. Maybe, after decades of a strained marriage, they confirmed their love for one another. Maybe they truly united in life right before their deaths.

It was a small comfort if they did, but there wasn't much he could offer his wife right now.

He couldn't wash away the terrors of her past. He could only promise her a better future. That was what their relationship was built on, trying to avoid the mistakes made by their own parents while building something completely new to both of them. Something stable and nurturing. Something that would endure.

"Maybe they reconciled," A-Li echoed.

**When Wang Lingjiao moved to hit the corpse again, Jiang Cheng shuddered and fell from the roof. Wei Wuxian quickly followed him as they fled. Jiang Cheng was openly crying, but Wei Wuxian's expression had hardened into a look of determination.**

**They ran until the sun came up, when Jiang Cheng finally collapsed.**

**"No," Jiang Cheng shook his head, and whirled around.**

**"Jiang Cheng, where are you going?" Wei Wuxian demanded, stopping him by grabbing his arm, "Don't go back."**

**"Don't go back?" Jiang Cheng snapped, "Listen to yourself. You're telling me not to go back? My parent's bodies are still in Lotus Pier. Where should I go if I don't go back?"**

**He yanked his arm free, but Wei Wuxian lunged forward to stop him again, "What can you do if you go back? They even killed Jiang-shushu and Madam Yu. You'll die if you go back."**

**"I don't care," Jiang Cheng insisted, "If you are afraid, go away then! Don't get in my way!"**

**Wei Wuxian refused to let go, "Jiang Cheng. Revenge is a dish best served cold. But not now!"**

**"If not now, when?" Jiang Cheng retorted, "I've already had enough of you. Get lost!"**

Get lost.

Jiang Cheng almost laughed at the cruel irony of his words. He kept telling Wei Wuxian to get lost, and then he was lost to them. For three months physically, for far longer in reality. They lost the old Wei Wuxian.

He hung his head, ready to receive his sister's disappointment. She wouldn't get angry. She never got angry at him, and she especially wouldn't hold his actions while he was grieving against him. So she would be disappointed, and it would hurt a thousand times worse than if she just struck him as he'd struck Wei Wuxian.

Jiang Cheng told him to get lost, and he did.

He should have been careful what he wished for. He hadn't been prepared to get it.

**With that, Jiang Cheng punched Wei Wuxian across the face. He tried to run again, but Wei Wuxian caught up, "Jiang-shushu and Madam Yu asked me to take good care of you. You must stay safe!"**

**"Shut up!" Jiang Cheng screamed, turning back to wrap his hands around Wei Wuxian's throat, "Why?!" He demanded, "Why? Tell me!" They fell to the ground, "Why did you save those guys? Are you happy now? I've told you so many times not to play the hero. Look, you are a hero now. Are you happy now? Are you satisfied now?"**

**Wei Wuxian didn't fight back, though he did weakly grab at Jiang Cheng's hands as the younger continued shouting, "You should've just let Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan die. Why should we care about their lives? Just let them die. Why did you stand up for them? Now, Yunmeng has been destroyed. My parents are gone. You are happy, aren't you? Why?"**

"How dare you!" Lan Wangji would have risen if his brother hadn't grabbed his shoulder.

He would have attacked if his brother hadn't taken his sword. He still could summon Bichen and send it across the room, but Jiang Yanli had tugged her brother closer. There were still tears in her eyes from the sight of one brother choking the other out, and in that moment, he couldn't bear to cause her anymore pain.

"How dare he what?" Nie Huaisang demanded, "Repeat the mistakes of his parents?" Xichen's grip weakened in shock, and Lan Wangji turned his attention to the smaller man, "Aren't all of us doing the same?"

Nie Mingjue flinched, as did Lianfeng-Zun and Jin Zixuan. Lan Wangji barely kept himself from outwardly reacting. The words struck too close to his heart. He was too close to making the same mistake as his father. He was tempted to hide Wei Wuxian away in Gusu and then seclude himself from the world as punishment.

As long as Wei Wuxian was safe, he would happily do so.

"Nothing changes," Nie Huaisang continued bitterly, "Not really."

"Do things need to change?" Jin Guangshan inquired.

“That depends,” Nie Huaisang shifted, “Things don’t change because we don’t feel responsible for them happening. Jiang-xiong blamed Hanguang-Jun and Jin Zixuan. Madam Yu blamed Wei-xiong. Most of you here blame the Wen Sect...as though there’s only one party to blame. But really, do you lump blame on one person because you can’t bear the guilt yourself?”

“You go too far!” Sect Leader Ouyang shouted.

“Don’t unburden yourself by getting mad at me,” Nie Huaisang sighed, but met his gaze, “Anger is so much easier to feel than guilt.”

**He let go suddenly, and Wei Wuxian limply fell to the ground. Jiang Cheng rolled away, “I want my parents.” He cried, “My parents, my seniors, my juniors. Now they are all gone, even Lotus Pier.”**

**They stayed there until later in the morning, when Wei Wuxian suddenly sat up. Jiang Cheng fiddled with some grass as Wei Wuxian stood, “Let’s go.” He grabbed his hand and tugged, but Jiang Cheng didn’t budge, “Don’t forget,” Wei Wuxian rasped, “Shijie is waiting alone for us to find her.”**

**That got Jiang Cheng moving.**

Anger truly was easier than guilt.

Jin Guangyao couldn’t say how he arrived at his conclusion. It started with Madam Yu beating Wei Wuxian. It strengthened at Jiang Fengmian’s parting words. It was finalized as Jiang Wanyin’s hands wrapped around Wei Wuxian’s throat.

Jin Guangshan, his father, would never love him. Not as a father should love a son.

Madam Jin would always hate him. There was no circumstance that could change her mind.

Jin Zixuan would side with his mother in the end.

What did that leave Jin Guangyao? He’d already ruined himself trying to earn his place here. As soon as he lied about what was happening with the Wen prisoners, he became a liar and murderer. They would have happened anyways...but that wasn’t a good enough excuse for Da-ge and Er-ge. They would abandon him.

He truly had nothing. Everything he’d done was pointless.

Jin Guangyao was livid.

**Jiang Yanli was hiding in the forest, hunched against a tree, when her brothers found her, “Shijie,” Wei Wuxian said.**

**She searched for his expression, “How is it?” Wei Wuxian turned away. She turned to Jiang Cheng, who cried silently. She sniffled, “A-Xian, go ahead.”**

**Lightning flashed across the sky, and suddenly rain began to fall as Wei Wuxian explained. Jiang Yanli's fist closed on the broken talisman so tightly she began to bleed. She fell against the tree, then slid down as they all openly cried again.**

**"I don't believe you," Jiang Yanli trembled as she sobbed, "I don't believe you."**

**They were the only survivors of the Jiang Sect.**

In the end, it was too simple to blame everything on the Wen Sect.

But did it go too far to blame everyone? For their words, for their actions, for their inaction?

Or did they try so hard to blame someone to avoid self-reflection?

## Chapter End Notes

My little sister: \*scrolling through my stats page\*

Her: Wow! You're famous!

Me: I write incredibly niche stories that most people don't have the patience or time to-

Her: Sh! You're famous!

Anyways, Happy Birthday to her!

Also, for future reference, I am terrible at telling when questions are genuine or rhetorical. If you want an answer, please say so!

Edit 5/22/21: We broke 2,000 kudos! Thank you all for the support!

# I've Got You Brother

## Chapter Summary

Commenters: When will we get to the golden core reveal?

What I read: Are we there yet?

Me: We'll get there when we get there!

Well folks, we got there.

## Chapter Notes

I feel like there should be a warning about this chapter, but I'm not exactly sure what to warn you about. Read if you feel ready.

Title from Brother by Kodaline

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Where do you think they’re at?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Wen Qing paused in her examination of a new talisman. She’d been trying to put what was going on at Koi Tower out of her mind. She didn’t feel like having the same argument with herself over and over again. Besides, she had work to do.

Wei Wuxian would never hurt her, even if she betrayed him.

Was it a betrayal if it was to save this idiot’s life? Nie Huaisang had spoken to her alone in Yiling. He’d already guessed there was something wrong with Wei Wuxian’s golden core. He all but begged her to include her opinion as a doctor. She didn’t think he guessed the transfer, but he knew something happened.

He made it seem like keeping it a secret would cost Wei Wuxian his life.

“Does it matter?” She asked back, “Someone will come when it’s finished.”

Wei Wuxian could hate her all she wanted, but Nie Huaisang was right. Even with all his power over resentful energy, knowing he had a damaged golden core, or none at all, would convince the cultivation world he wasn’t a threat. They would be happy to know the Yiling Patriarch had such a weakness.

If he was less of a threat, he could live. Which meant she would never have to repay him with her life.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Wei Wuxian got them both on the boat and used an actual oar this time to move them further down the river.**

Jiang Yanli wished she could stop crying, but she there was so much she didn't notice. It must have been agonizing for A-Xian to row the boat with his injuries. He could barely walk when they escaped Lotus Pier, and there he was the next morning, pushing himself.

For them. For her. For his brother who choked him and spat the same words as the woman who'd tormented him nearly his entire life.

She pulled herself together enough to let go of her younger brother's hand, "You should sit with our Sect."

He met her gaze, "Do you blame me?"

For A-Xian leaving?

She shook her head, "No."

A-Cheng nodded, but moved away. She clenched her hands in her robes. Watching this all over again, she didn't think there was anything they could do to push A-Xian away. They could hurt him, hate him, scorn him, and he would take it all without hating them. He'd feel he deserved it.

Maybe being with them wasn't the best thing for A-Xian.

**Time skipped to them in an inn. Wei Wuxian watched the storm from an open window. Jiang Yanli was asleep in the bed, and Jiang Cheng sat listlessly by a table. Wei Wuxian checked his sister, who roused at his touch, "A-Xian."**

**She tried to sit up, but Wei Wuxian stopped her, "Shijie. You have a bad fever. I will go and buy some medicine. Don't worry. I assure you I will not run around."**

**She went back to sleep. He adjusted the blankets around her. He hesitated before moving towards Jiang Cheng. He crouched down and grabbed his shoulder, "Jiang Cheng," He received no acknowledgment, "Shijie has a bad fever. I will go and buy Shijie some medicine. Take care of Shijie. Stay here and don't ever leave, okay?"**

**He waited, but again received no response.**

**Wei Wuxian then left, but not before sending another worried look at Jiang Cheng.**

Jiang Cheng sat back amongst his disciples.

He thought about sticking close to his sister. He never told her why he disappeared. He had been too caught up in surviving, in losing his core, to ever let them know the real reason he went back to Lotus Pier.

But he had to include the real reason. He had to show he was captured to save Wei Wuxian.

Otherwise, they would all think him a monster. They would question why he wanted Wei Wuxian back as Head Disciple if all they saw was him strangling his brother and blaming him for the loss of their home, then never speaking of it again when he returned as a demonic cultivator. If there was any question of his love, Wei Wuxian would end up somewhere else.

He had to show that his words rarely matched his feelings. He'd gladly take the hit to his reputation if it meant he could have his words dismissed.

He still had a lot to apologize for.

**All along the street, Wen disciples stopped passerbys, searching for the three survivors. Wei Wuxian stopped to buy food, and noticed them. He sensed them stopping behind him, and heard them grip their swords.**

**This is what Jiang Cheng saw as he emerged from the inn. He watched as Wei Wuxian was surrounded, and he closed his eyes, "Take care of A-Jie."**

**He stepped into the open, and was immediately caught by the Wen disciples.**

**"I got him!" Those behind Wei Wuxian were distracted, "Here!"**

"Jiang Wanyin..."

"A-Cheng..."

"Jiang-xiong," Nie Huaisang's earlier anger faded.

Only slightly. It didn't make it better that Jiang Cheng would die for Wei Wuxian. It didn't change years of mistreatment. If Wei Wuxian decided then to start distancing himself from the Jiangs, Nie Huaisang wouldn't blame him.

Even if it tore at him, knowing Wei Wuxian would just accept that blame and mistreatment, it was ultimately his choice what he was willing to put up with.

In Nie Huaisang's opinion, he was too forgiving.

"Why?" Jin Zixuan managed to ask, "Why would you give your life for him?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Jiang Cheng asked, "Wei Wuxian...he was better. At the time, rebuilding seemed impossible." His hands clenched, and his disciples winced, "Between Wei Wuxian and I, he seemed like he could do it. Protect A-Jie, defeat the Wen Sect, rebuild the Jiang Sect and Lotus Pier...because he wouldn't have had to do it alone."

Nie Huaisang frowned, "If you asked..."

Jiang Cheng laughed, “You know I’d never, but Wei Wuxian...Lan Wangji would have all but moved to Lotus Pier. You would have snuck out of the Unclean Realm to help him decorate or some other nonsense...”

Nie Huaisang could picture it. They could have built on the rumors of Wei Wuxian being Jiang Fengmian’s bastard. Jiang Yanli would have supported him as her brother. Hanguang-Jun wouldn’t have left him alone, and Nie Huaisang would have done everything in his power to show his support.

Jiang Cheng didn’t ask for help even when he desperately needed it.

Neither did Wei Wuxian, but Wei Wuxian wouldn’t have turned them away. Couldn’t have turned him away otherwise Jiang Yanli would have been forced into the Sect Leader position. She would have done great, but no one would ever give her the respect she deserved and she wouldn’t have been free to marry Jin Zixuan.

Besides, Hanguang-Jun wouldn’t have let himself be turned away if it was Wei Wuxian struggling.

Nie Huaisang considered Jiang Cheng to be his friend, but he was more than aware that Jiang Cheng considered him more of Wei Wuxian’s friend than his own. They didn’t have much in common other than Wei Wuxian, seeing as Jiang Cheng focused more on the martial arts while he himself was more dedicated to the aesthetic arts.

“Would they even let a bastard be Sect Leader?” San-ge’s voice sounded off.

Da-ge shared a quick glance with him, before coughing, “There wouldn’t be another option.”

“He’d never be accepted,” San-ge shook his head, “Not truly.”

Oh no. Normally it was hard to tell what San-ge was thinking or feeling. Even now it was difficult, but Nie Huaisang had known him for years. He could read the devastation.

He must have realized he could never have a place in the Jin Sect, no matter what he did.

“Anyone can be accepted,” Nie Huaisang offered, “By the right company.”

**Wei Wuxian hurried back to the inn, but Jiang Cheng was long gone. He immediately knelt by Jiang Yanli, “Shijie,” He shook her until she woke up, “Shijie. Jiang Cheng is gone. Did he tell you where he went?”**

**“A-Cheng is gone?” Jiang Yanli asked.**

**He flew down the stairs, “Sir, the gongzi that came with me, have you seen him?”**

**“The gongzi that came with you?” The innkeeper echoed, “I saw him earlier. There were too many guests. I didn’t pay him any attention. He must have left.”**

Jiang Wanyin purposefully left to save Wei Wuxian.



They all noted the self-deprecation of his explanation. For all their focus on Madam Yu's mistreatment of Wei Wuxian, they had not thought of her treatment of Jiang Wanyin. She tried to drive a wedge between the two by constantly comparing them. She constantly insulted Wei Wuxian, and by doing so she belittled Jiang Wanyin.

She didn't succeed in getting Jiang Wanyin to hate Wei Wuxian. She only succeeded in making him believe Wei Wuxian would be better at everything.

Though he did have a point for the wrong reason. Wei Wuxian also lost his Sect, but he didn't lose his parents again. Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian had never been his parents. Instead of focusing on losing them, he focused on taking care of Jiang Yanli and Jiang Wanyin.

They weren't out of danger yet.

No one dared ask if Jiang Wanyin himself simply wanted to die. That where Wei Wuxian was better was his perseverance through suffering.

**Wei Wuxian's breathing picked up as he panicked, "Left?" He ran back to Jiang Yanli, who collapsed back on the bed.**

**"He left?" She wondered, shaking her head, "Where would A-Cheng go? What do we do? What do we do now?"**

**"He can't return to Lotus Pier," Wei Wuxian's eyes widened.**

**Jiang Yanli shook her head, "We have to find him. Please be safe, A-Cheng." She shakily got up, but couldn't walk, "Please be safe, A-Cheng."**

**Wei Wuxian forced her back on the bed, his voice choking up, "Shijie, you can't go. Listen to me. Go to Madam Liu's for a while, okay? Don't go." He squeezed her hands, "Wait for me there. I promise you I will surely take Jiang Cheng..." His breath hitched, "I will surely take him back."**

**Thunder crashed, "But...Please be safe, I'm begging you. Promise me."**

**She bowed her head, "Okay. I promise you. I will be fine." He smiled tightly, and she adjusted her grip, "But you need to promise me. You must find A-Cheng. You have to bring him back. Let's go to Meishan together, okay?"**

**He nodded, then wiped away his tears. He squeezed her hands one last time before running from the room.**

Jiang Wanyin didn't deserve Wei Ying's loyalty. Even if he was willing to die for him as well.

But he wasn't wrong. Wei Ying was far more likely to be able to rescue him than Jiang Wanyin was of the opposite. Wei Ying did get Jiang Yanli somewhere safe, eventually arranging her transport to Lanling. Wei Ying won the war.

Wei Ying could have rebuilt the Jiang Sect if he needed to.

Jiang Wanyin never could have done what Wei Ying did.

“Peace, Wangji,” Xichen warned.

“If he had anything to do with Wei Ying’s disappearance...” Lan Wangji trailed off.

“By your reasoning or ours?” Lianfeng-Zun asked, “You want to blame him, so you will.”

It was a blunt truth, and that, more than anything, made him regain control over himself. He wanted to blame Jiang Wanyin, he wanted to get revenge for Wei Ying. Revenge wouldn’t help Wei Ying though. It would only create further misunderstandings between them if he were to attack his brother.

**It was night when he reached Lotus Pier again. He easily snuck in and started down the halls. Hearing someone, he ducked behind a doorway. When they passed, and he caught sight of red robes, he grabbed them in a chokehold, “Don’t move, or I will twist your throat off.”**

**“Wei-gongzi,” Wen Ning gasped, “It’s me.”**

**“Don’t play tricks,” Wei Wuxian tightened his grip.**

**“I’m not,” Wen Ning denied, “Look at my face.”**

**Wei Wuxian held him away, “Wen Ning...” He kept his grip firm, “Did you participate in the massacre at Lotus Pier? Tell me, did you?” He shifted to hold his robes, “You are so ungrateful. I shouldn’t have saved you to begin with.”**

So he did retain some sense.

Nie Mingjue knew Wen Ning and Wen Qing would come back soon, but it was one thing to disobey when it was Wen Chao giving the orders. It was another when Wen Ruohan demanded their deaths. Yet there Wen Ning was.

Wen Ning, who would make a useless hostage and a useless ally.

"Don't underestimate Wen Ning," Huaisang said.

Now? Never. The Ghost General would be a fierce opponent. But back then...

“I’m just not seeing how this turns into a life debt,” Nie Mingjue replied.

“It’s because he’s easy to dismiss that he can do the unimaginable,” His little brother pointed out, “They do get Jiang-xiong out of there.”

Right. Wei Wuxian currently had nothing besides a Yin Iron sword he couldn’t control. Nothing suited to a rescue mission of this importance. There was also giving up on Jiang Wanyin and focusing on Jiang Yanli, but Wei Wuxian seemed to be loyal above all else.

He wouldn’t put his personal safety above either of his siblings. Not if he had any chance.

Wei Wuxian was also a man who didn't believe in the impossible.

**“Wei-gongzi, I didn't,” Wen Ning pleaded, “I came here after hearing the news. I just arrived.” Wei Wuxian's hands trembled as he let him go, and Wen Ning continued, “I rushed here immediately, but...I was still too late. Wei-gongzi, you are about to find Jiang-gongzi.”**

**“What are you saying?” Wei Wuxian snapped, “You saw Jiang Cheng?”**

**Wen Ning nodded, “He was caught by Wen Chao.”**

**Wei Wuxian grabbed his hand, “Is Jiang Cheng really inside?”**

**Wen Ning nodded.**

**Wei Wuxian looked away, “*Jiang Cheng is inside. I have to get inside Lotus Pier. Should I use Wen Ning as a hostage? He is one of the Wen Sect after all. If I want to make sure nothing goes wrong. I must use him.*” Then he caught sight of the talisman he gave him when they were in Gusu, and he let go.**

Wen Ning hadn't known if Wei Wuxian survived.

He came running anyways.

“Just like you,” Lan Xichen turned to A-Yao.

His younger sworn brother tilted his head, “I suppose there are similarities, but I'm not...”

Like Wen Ning? A weaker cultivator dismissed by his family. So fiercely loyal to the first person to show him genuine kindness that he was willing to face the Wen Sect to rescue them? Lan Xichen flicked his gaze to the jade token A-Yao wore in the same place Wen Ning carried the talisman. A cherished token of trust and protection, even if every Lan Sect member had one.

“Er-ge,” A-Yao grimaced, “I'm not a good man. Wen Ning has no blood on his hands-”

That was becoming increasingly obvious.

“-And I have so much,” A-Yao whispered, “And it was all for nothing.”

Lan Xichen frowned. What did he mean by that? The blood on his hands from killing the Captain was for nothing, but surely A-Yao didn't feel this much despair about that. Everyone he helped torture and kill under Wen Ruohan was for a purpose. It was to maintain his position as a spy and ultimately get close enough to the tyrant to kill him.

A chill ran down his spine. How long had A-Yao known Wen Ning had no blood on his hands?

**“Wei-gongzi, you came back to rescue Jiang-gongzi, right?” Wen Ning asked.**

**“Of course,” Wei Wuxian answered.**

**“I...can help you rescue him,” Wen Ning offered.**

**“You’re willing to help?” Wei Wuxian stared at him.**

**“I can help you take him out now,” Wen Ning answered.**

**Wei Wuxian grabbed his arm again, but this time it wasn’t to restrain, it was in excitement, “You can save him?”**

**“Yes,” Wen Ning nodded, “JieJie and I, though we are assigned to the Yiling Supervisory Office, we still have a bunch of obedient disciples.”**

**“Can you help me take Jiang Cheng, as well as the remains of Jiang-shushu and Madam Yu out?” Wei Wuxian expanded on his request.**

**Wen Ning nodded, “I will try my best.”**

**Wei Wuxian trembled as he hesitantly nodded back.**

**“How fortunate for the Jiang Sect,” Jin Guangshan commented.**

**“Do none of you understand how powerful kindness is?” A-Li asked.**

**If it were anyone else, he would have responded. But if the Jin Sect were to control Wei Wuxian, they needed her. So he leaned back in his seat and kept his mouth shut.**

**A-Li took this as permission to continue, “Many of you strive to dominate or be feared. Both methods create as much resentment as the power you gain. Being kind can gain you allies without enemies.”**

**“Not everyone deserves kindness,” His wife commented.**

**“And yet so many suffer from the lack of it,” A-Li shook her head, “I would rather be kind to the wrong person than let someone be deprived of any kindness.”**

**“Kindness doesn’t win battles,” Jin Guangshan dismissed.**

**She met his gaze, her smile distinctly false, “If Zewu-Jun had not been kind to Meng Yao, would he have become Lianfeng-Zun? If A-Xian had not been kind to Wen Qionglin, would we have survived their hunt for us?” She paused, “If Lianfeng-Zun and A-Xian weren’t there, would we have won?”**

**“It is impossible to know someone’s heart, nor to anticipate what can change it,” She adjusted her sleeve, “One act of cruelty created the monster Xue Yang became. One act of kindness gave us Lianfeng-Zun. I’d say it is far wiser to be kind.”**

**Was she trying to stand up for the bastard? Jin Guangshan was aware of the whispering. A-Zuan was the representative of the Jin Sect during the war. His bastard was the spy turned**

assassin. He was already losing the support of the majority in their hearts.

Kindness wasn't just powerful, it was terrifying.

**Wen Ning made his way to the store room with a packet of medicine. He looked at the jars of alcohol, and methodically began drugging it.**

**He was nearly finished when guards called out to him, "Who's there?" But as they drew closer they saluted, "Is this Wen Ning?"**

**Wen Ning held up the jar in his hands, "Is this wine for Wen-er-gongzi? I'm checking it." He set the jar back down with an innocent smile.**

**"Why did you return from Yiling?" The guard asked, "Have you seen Wen-er-gongzi?"**

**Wen Ning stood up straighter, "I heard Wen-er-gongzi obliterated the Jiang Sect. Therefore, I came to look. You should leave it alone. I am going to see Wen-er-gongzi." With that, he walked off.**

"So he was definitely caught," Huaisang sighed.

Jin Guangyao grimaced. Wen Qing and her younger brother weren't mentioned by Wen Ruohan when he was in Nightless City. Neither was brought to the dungeon there, and he never followed up on either of them. Until Wen Ning made an appearance in the Jin labor camps, he never spared them a second thought.

"Definitely," Jiang Wanyin grimaced.

Wen Ning arrived unexpectedly, then everyone was drugged. It wasn't a difficult connection to make. Especially with his clan's focus on medicine.

"If only he were willing to kill," Da-ge grumbled.

If only. Then maybe he could have fought Jin Zixun and kept his people safe. Maybe they'd never have ended up under the Jin Sect's control. Wei Wuxian hadn't cared enough to stop them until he heard Wen Ning was in danger. No one would have questioned the Jin Sect's actions at all if Wei Wuxian weren't involved.

And yet, he was self-aware enough to admit blaming Wei Wuxian for uncovering their crimes was misplaced. It was just easier to be mad at getting caught than to be mad at himself for going along with it.

It would have happened anyways...

No, it happened because Jin Guangshan was greedy. He was willing to use anyone and anything to get what he wanted. What were the lives of innocents to the power he gained from experimenting with them? What was the soul of his bastard compared to the rewards he could get from blackening it?

**Wen Ning later went to the main courtyard to retrieve Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian's bodies. Everyone else was passed out. He quickly directed his disciples to store the bodies, then went and grabbed an unconscious Jiang Cheng himself. On his way out, he noticed Zidian and grabbed that as well.**

**Wei Wuxian waited at the back pier. Just as he began to doubt this plan, he heard two Wen disciples complain about the alcohol in Lotus Pier. He recalled a better memory of drinking on the back pavilion, getting ready to pick lotus seeds and coming up with the idea for liquor made from lotus seeds.**

**"Wei-gongzi," Wen Ning drew him from his stupor, and he noticed Jiang Cheng on Wen Ning's back. He stood up immediately, leaning Jiang Cheng's body against his own in the boat. Wen Ning sat across from him.**

**"Where are the others?" Wei Wuxian asked.**

**"Don't worry, Wei-gongzi," Wen Ning assured him, "I drugged them. They are safe for the moment." Wei Wuxian slowly checked Jiang Cheng's breathing, "Jiang-gongzi is just in a coma, but he has broken several ribs, and he also has been whipped."**

**"Whipped?" Wei Wuxian echoed.**

**"Wen Chao found the Jiang Sect's discipline whip," Wen Ning said, "Jiang-gongzi should have other wounds." He bowed his head, then looked back up, "By the way, here's Jiang-gongzi's Zidian. I've brought it." He offered the bracelet up.**

**Wei Wuxian accepted it, "Thanks."**

Everything the Jiang Sect had, they owed to Wen Ning.

And the Jin Sect killed him.

His Sect killed him, and most of the Wen who were like him.

Jin Zixuan desperately wanted to know why. Did his disciples get so caught up in revenge they couldn't tell the difference between right and wrong? Did they simply not care what was right and what was wrong? Was this deliberate? Did his father feel so threatened by the mere survival of a handful of healers?

What? Did he think they would rebuild the Wen Sect and challenge his power?

How much suffering did he himself turn a blind eye to?

**"Don't say so, Wei-gongzi," Wen Ning frowned, then gasped again, "Jiang-zongzhu and Madam Jiang's bodies have been carried out by my men. I'll deliver them to you later." He glanced up, "You'd better leave as soon as you can. Go." He made to leave the boat.**

**"Go?" Wei Wuxian wondered, "Jiang Cheng is severely wounded. Where can we go?"**

**Wen Nin crouched down, “Wei-gongzi, if you trust me, I can take you somewhere to hide. Jiang-gongzi badly needs medicine and rest now. He can’t stand a long journey.”**

**“Where?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**“Yiling,” Wen Ning replied, “Go to Jie’s. She can treat him.”**

**Tears welled in Wei Wuxian’s eyes as he nodded his agreement, “Thank you, Wen Ning.”**

**Wen Ning smiled tentatively, then took the oar and started paddling them away.**

**“He did so much,” Nie Mingjue closed his eyes.**

**And he condemned them to death for their inaction.**

**Part of him wanted to snap at the present Jiangs. Why didn’t either say Wen Ning and Wen Qing saved them? Even just sharing Wen Ning saved their parents’ bodies from further desecration or returned his spiritual weapon would have been enough for him to consider. The combination of all three was truly humbling.**

**It made sense why Wei Wuxian would kill those at Qionqiong Pass for the death of Wen Ning.**

**Those two, and their small, humble outer Clan, were truly different from the rest of their kin. They took action when it was needed. Wen Ning went when he heard Lotus Pier was attacked. He was just too late to make a difference. Still, he did what he could, saved what he could. He acted heroically in the face of certain death at Wen Chao’s hands.**

**And they repaid all his help with death and exile.**

**It was midday when they picked up Jiang Yanli, who immediately started crying over her brother’s unresponsive body in Wen Ning’s arms, “What happened?”**

**“Jiang-guniang,” Wen Ning said, “Jiang-gongzi is just in a coma. Let’s treat him.”**

**“You...” Her eyes filled with fear.**

**“Don’t worry, Jiang-guniang,” Wen Ning’s voice softened, “Wei-gongzi once saved me. I won’t turn my back against him.”**

**Jiang Yanli glanced at Wei Wuxian, who nodded in confirmation.**

**“A-Xian, A-Li,” Madam Liu said, “You should get moving. Don’t delay it any longer.” Wei Wuxian bowed, and she grabbed his arms, “A-Xian, what are you doing?”**

**Jiang Yanli turned her around and clasped her hands, “Popo, you should also find a place to hide. Don’t stay here.”**

**The older woman nodded, “Zongzhu and Madam Yu are both gone. You are also leaving. What can an old lady do even if I stay?”**

**“Popo,” Wei Wuxian started, “We’ll come back.”**

And come back they did.

Lan Qiren forced himself to watch. They all ignored Wei Wuxian when he claimed a life debt to Wen Ning. They had thought the demonic cultivator arrogant. They thought he was siding with the Wen Sect.

They didn’t believe a Wen would help their side once the war started.

**Wen Ning once again paddled them down the river. When they landed near Yiling, he used his money to rent a horse and carriage, and hid them within. It took time, but eventually they reached the office, “Wei-gongzi, we are here.”**

**Wei Wuxian peered out, and swallowed nervously, “Where are we?”**

**“Let’s get in first,” Wen Ning evaded, “There are too many eyes.”**

**“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli soothed, “Wen-gongzi is right. Let’s get in.”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, and hoisted Jiang Cheng only his shoulders. They followed Wen Ning until Wei Wuxian figured out where they were, “Wait.” He set Jiang Cheng down, leaning on Jiang Yanli, “Shijie.” He then stalked up to Wen Ning and grabbed his robes, “Where is this place?”**

**“This is Yiling,” Wen Ning answered, “I...”**

**“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli pleaded, “What are you doing?”**

**Wei Wuxian pushed him back, knocking over a light fixture, “It’s the Supervisory Office in Yiling? Which unlucky family’s place did you take? What do you want by bringing us here?”**

All valid questions.

And yet...they could all tell this wasn’t a trap. It was such a ridiculous place to hide that it almost made sense. Wen Qing was a direct relation of Wen Ruohan. It was suicide to go against him when she was directly under his thumb, so no Wen disciple would believe she was hiding the enemy.

If Wen Ning hadn’t been found by the wine, they might have been able to help with nobody knowing.

Were they punished? Was that why no one heard of Wen Qing during the war? Surely such a prodigious healer would have some rumors around her. At least, they could have tracked the movements of the injured and guessed where she was.

So she was imprisoned for this.



And Wen Ning? Maybe the reason he ended up in a Jin Sect prison was because he was weakened by his own Sect.

**“Wei-gongzi, listen to me,” Wen Ning didn’t push back, “It’s the Supervisory Office but also my sister’s residence. I have no intention of hurting you. If I had wanted to hurt you, I would have turned you over after getting into Lotus Pier that night. Why would I bother to take you here?”**

**“The people of the Wen Sect are searching for survivors of all Sects,” Wen Ning continued, “I can’t make you run with me randomly. At least it’s safe here. They won’t search the inner rooms of the Supervisory Office.”**

**“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli pleaded again, “Wen-gongzi is right. Stop being paranoid like this.”**

**Wei Wuxian let Wen Ning go, “I’m sorry.”**

**“N-no,” Wen Ning stammered, “It’s alright, Wei-gongzi. Let’s get in first. When my sister comes, we can-”**

**“A-Ning,” Wen Qing announced her presence. They all turned to see her standing on the porch.**

**At the same time, a guard started banging on the gate, “Open the door! Open the door! Is anyone inside? Open the door now! Where are the people inside? What’s going on? Open the door!” Wei Wuxian stole Wen Ning’s sword and lifted it, “Open it!”**

**Wei Wuxian pointed the blade at Wen Qing, who raised her voice, “It’s nothing! My brother’s back! He is ill again. You can step down.”**

**“Yes, my lady,” The guard walked away.**

**Exhausted, Wei Wuxian lowered the sword.**

That was that.

Wen Qing betrayed the Wen Sect. She saved the Jiang Sect.

Jiang Cheng couldn’t help the thrum of vindication on her behalf. They never would have believed him if they hadn’t seen her heroism for themselves. And he fell in love with her all over again. To know she could have saved herself and revealed them the moment they got there, but chose to save them...

Wen Qing was far better than him.

**“She’s amazing,” Jin Zixuan complimented, “To aid one’s enemies...”**

**“We were never her enemies,” Jiang Cheng corrected, “And she was never ours.”**

He glared at Chifeng-Zun, and the man grimaced, “We have wronged her.”

Nie Huaisang smirked, "Is this where you gave her the comb, Jiang-xiong?"

Jiang Cheng shook his head, letting his glare fade. He hadn't realized how much sacrificing his life paled in comparison to what would soon be revealed. He wondered if they would look at him as someone who cheated and got a second chance he didn't deserve, or if they would be intimidated that he'd gotten his core from an immortal.

**Wei Wuxian was tending to Jiang Cheng when someone knocked on the door. He moved to stare at it suspiciously, but Wen Qing just said, "Wei-gongzi." And led him outside.**

**They stood together on the porch, "A while ago...what happened on Muxi Mountain..."**

**"It has passed," Wei Wuxian dismissed, "There's no need to mention it."**

**"What about..." She trailed off, "Lotus Pier?"**

**Wei Wuxian gripped the rail tightly, "I'll kill those who are responsible." His hand curled into a fist.**

**Wen Qing nodded, "I see," She turned away, then smiled, "What is it?" She lifted her chin, "Are you going to kill me now?"**

**Wei Wuxian inhaled sharply, but didn't respond.**

It was the question they all needed to hear.

Could they kill her now? Could they condemn her to exile for her name where her deeds saved the Jiang Sect?

Wei Wuxian swore to kill all those responsible.

Those responsible were dead.

The ones left...they were innocent. Did that justify killing in order to free them though? Did imprisonment count as mistreatment or was the Jin Sect more than simply negligent in weeding out the guilty?

Did it make the Yiling Patriarch any less dangerous?

**Wen Qing walked back inside, "I'll take a look at Jiang Cheng."**

**Wei Wuxian followed her.**

**Wen Qing sat by Jiang Cheng's side, pulled down the blankets and checked his abdomen, "Three ribs are broken," She reported, tugging open his robes, "The wounds caused by whips haven't healed yet, but it's not a big issue. It'll leave scars." She fixed his robes and pulled the blanket up, "He's lost some power," She picked up his wrist, "Which will take several days to recover."**

**When she checked his wrist, she gasped, her eyes widening with dread. She pressed her fingers in harder, “How could this happen?”**

**“What’s wrong?” Wei Wuxian demanded. Wen Qing continued to stare in horror, so he repeated, “What’s wrong with him?”**

**She looked up at him sadly, “His golden core has been crushed.”**

All conversation stopped.

“How...” Nie Huaisang trailed off.

It was obvious to everyone how Jiang Wanyin lost his core. Wen Zhuliu.

“How did you get it back?” The young Master of Qinghe continued.

“Wei Wuxian’s grandmaster is an immortal,” Jiang Wanyin answered.

“But he doesn’t know where she is,” Lianfeng-Zun frowned.

“A-Xian rescued Song Zichen,” Madam Jiang offered in explanation, “He had recently been healed by Baoshan Sanren.”

Of course. They’d all heard of the attack on the Snow White Pavilion. If Xiao Xingchen was desperate enough to save his cultivation partner, then he would return to his Master. Song Zichen witnessed how close Xiao Xingchen and Wei Wuxian grew in their brief acquaintance. Seeing him in similar desperation would loosen his tongue.

Why would Baoshan Sanren refuse the son of her favorite disciple? Especially once she learned how he was failed by the mortal world.

**The next morning, when Wei Wuxian brought breakfast, Jiang Cheng’s eyes were open. He set down the tray and smiled, “Jiang Cheng. You are awake.” He pressed a hand to his own chest, “Do you know who I am?” He sat on the bed, “Can you hear me?”**

**Jiang Cheng didn’t respond.**

**“Jiang Cheng,” A bit of desperation leaked into his voice, “Don’t scare me. Jiang Cheng. Jiang Cheng.” He shook his arm, “Say something. Jiang Cheng. Say something to me.”**

**Jiang Cheng sat up suddenly, his hand coming up to look at the scars on his chest.**

**“Quit it,” Wei Wuxian scolded half-heartedly, “I’ll find a way to erase them, hm?”**

**Jiang Cheng shoved him.**

**“Okay,” Wei Wuxian sighed, “You can hit me if you feel better that way.”**

**“Did you feel it?” Jiang Cheng asked.**

**“What?” Wei Wuxian wondered.**

**“I mean...” Jiang Cheng hesitated, “I’ve used all my spiritual power to hit you just now. I ask you, did you feel it?”**

**Wei Wuxian’s smile grew more strained, “Oh. Then hit me again. Give it another try.”**

**Jiang Cheng shook his head, “There’s no need. It will be the same no matter how many times I hit you. Wei Wuxian, do you know why he is called the Core-Melting Hand? Because his hands can crush your golden core. It will dissipate your spiritual power and stop you from making a golden core again, leaving you as a mediocre person forever.”**

**“Jiang-xiong,” Nie Huaisang snapped his fan shut.**

Lan Wangji just stared at the man he resented. It all suddenly made sense. His hand clenched into a fist, “You were willing to give your life, but not your cultivation?”

Jiang Wanyin never told Wei Ying about his sacrifice. He thought it was to spare Wei Ying from any more guilt, but now he could see that it was out of regret. Jiang Wanyin would have died in peace, knowing he saved his brother and gave his sister and Sect the best chance of survival. He couldn’t bear the humiliation from the result of torture.

**“He wasn’t thinking clearly,” His older brother defended, “Losing your core...I can’t imagine how painful that would be.”**

Lan Wangji couldn’t either. The few survivors of Wen Zhuliu’s attack described it as losing their souls. It felt like their very purpose for living was gone. It was never long after losing their cores that they turned to drinking. Anything to feel that warmth inside. When alcohol wasn’t enough to fill the void, they inevitably gave into despair.

Yet his sympathy went to Wei Ying. He was also burdened by Jiang Wanyin’s suffering, and then more so by having to figure out how to lift them.

**“Core-Melting Hand,” Wei Wuxian repeated.**

**“Core-Melting Hand,” Jiang Cheng looked down at his hands, “I will never form a golden core again. Never again! I’ll be mediocre for the rest of my life. I can never realize my dream of being at the top.” He started hitting himself, gasping as he panicked.**

**Wei Wuxian stopped him, “Jiang Cheng.”**

**“Did you know?” Jiang Cheng demanded, “My parents’ cores were crushed by him. They lost the power to resist and were murdered by him.” He grabbed Wei Wuxian and pushed him off the bed, “Did you know that?” He panted, “Wen Zhuliu. Wen Zhuliu. I will have my revenge.” He tried to get up, “I will have my revenge!”**

**Wei Wuxian stopped him again, “Jiang Cheng.”**

**Jiang Cheng sobbed, “How can I get my revenge? I lost my golden core now and I can’t make a golden core in the future.” He threw Wei Wuxian’s hand off him, “How can I get my revenge? Wei Wuxian,” He clutched his robes, “Why did you save me? It’s useless to save me. I’m only alive to witness the Wen Sect’s ostentation and I can’t do anything about it.”**

**He fell back against the bed, sitting down and crying.**

Nie Huaisang fought back tears of his own.

He told them that the point of this was despair. They needed to justify demonic cultivation, and the only justification that would be accepted was there being no other way. But he suddenly put the pieces together.

There was no way...but it had to be.

Xiao Xingchen now wandered the cultivation world blind. It was the only reliable information he had gotten about his movements. Why would he if he could return to his grandmaster and be healed?

It only made sense if there was a price to healing. A balance. He had to see if Song Zichen’s injuries were eye related, but a transplant made more sense than a miracle. Immortals were bound by their own rules and limitations, even if they lived far longer than anyone else.

He’d always wondered what happened to Wei Wuxian’s cultivation.

“Nie Zhonghui,” He turned around and passed back a note to his Sect’s Head Disciple.

His cousin read it, frowned, but nodded and got up.

He wished he could savor the trust his disciples now had in him, but he really hoped he was wrong.

**Wen Qing hesitantly entered the room with another tray of food. She checked on Wei Wuxian first, then her gaze drifted to Jiang Cheng. Looking saddened, she set down the tray and took a deep breath, then approached Jiang Cheng, “Jiang-gongzi. Let me help you get up.”**

**She knelt down and reached for his hand. He couldn’t look at her, but let out a little gasp at her touch. When he finally looked at her, all he could see was the flames on her sleeves. He pushed her away, “Get out!” He panicked, “Get out! I don’t need your mercy. I don’t want to see anyone from the Wen Sect. I don’t want to see you. Get lost!”**

**Wen Qing’s eyes widened with hurt as he continued to scream at her and sob. She glanced at Wei Wuxian, then lowered her gaze and walked out slowly. She made her way over to where Wen Ning was brewing medications.**

**He rose, “Jiejie.”**

**She checked on one, then shook her head, “Two kinds of guiding drugs are missing. Wuwei seed and dengxin grass. Boil a new one.”**

**“Oh,” Wen Ning shifted nervously, “Jiejie, about Jiang-gongzi...”**

**She let out a deep breath, “He won’t get well.”**

“Huaisang?” Nie Mingjue asked quietly.

Jiang Wanyin wouldn’t get well without a miracle. They already heard he would get one.

Thanks to Wei Wuxian.

His reaction to Wen Qing was understandable given the circumstances. It made him feel even worse for vilifying her. There was no mistaking the hurt in her eyes at being regarded as the enemy, nor the way she accepted it because she knew few would look past her name.

She was right.

“Don’t ask, Da-ge,” His younger brother requested, even as Nie Zhonghui disappeared out of sight, “I just hope I’m wrong.”

What was there to be right or wrong about?

Lady Luo shared a worried look with him, before she reached over to pour him more tea, “Should we be prepared for a fight?”

Huaisang fiddled with his sleeve, “I can handle it.” Then he offered a weak smile, “Don’t worry about it. I’m probably wrong.”

Or he wasn’t, and something was about to go terribly wrong.

Nie Mingjue couldn’t guess what. Did he suspect Wen Ning or Wen Qing had something to do with Wei Wuxian’s disappearance?

**“What?” Wen Ning’s eyes widened, “Jiejie, are we going to start a feud? Jiejie.” She smiled wistfully, “Please save him.”**

**“There already is a feud,” Wen Qing said.**

**“Jiejie,” Wen Ning looked away for a second, “What should we do?”**

**She took one of his hands in both of hers, “A-Ning, remember this. What the Wen Sect did doesn’t represent us. We have practiced medicine for generations. We only save people. We never kill them. Do you understand?” Wen Ning nodded, and she sighed and started to walk away, “Send him away when he gets better.”**

**“To where?” Wen Ning wondered.**

**Wen Qing looked forward, “Anywhere but here. You have been to Yunmeng. Wen Chao is not a fool. He will search here soon.” She took another deep breath.**

**“Jiejie,” Wen Ning called after her, “Thank you.”**

**She just smiled at her little brother.**

They don’t kill.

They never killed.

It was impossible to consider Wen Qing an enemy. They knew too much about her now. Her father had been killed by Wen Ruohan. She subtly helped their side as best she could with a threat on her brother’s life. She tried to free them from the cave regardless of that threat. She sheltered them when it meant her own imprisonment or death.

If there was any evil in her heart, it was put there by their actions.

She was their enemy if she sought revenge.

Wouldn’t they deserve it? It was selfish to still want her dead.

**Later in the day, while she was checking her inventory, Wei Wuxian walked into her room, “I want to ask you a favor.”**

**She turned to face him, “What can I do?”**

**“I need medical books,” Wei Wuxian requested, “All medical books, including ancient versions. All the books that can be found.”**

**Wen Qing lowered her head, “Wei Wuxian. You need to rest.”**

**“I need medical books,” Wei Wuxian insisted.**

**Seeing the desperation in his eyes, she gave in and led him to her library, where Wei Wuxian immediately collected a large stack and started pouring through them.**

“Baoshan Sanren didn’t come to mind immediately,” Nie Huaisang noted.

MianMian raised her eyebrows, “Why start with a miracle?”

She tried to follow his thought process. Something had shaken him so deeply that all his earlier rage was gone. Was it Jiang Wanyin losing his core? It did prove he was different from his mother, willing to give everything for Wei Wuxian...but that didn’t seem right. She supposed with the Nie Sect’s history of Qi deviations he would know more about golden cores...

But even Nie Huaisang was limited in his knowledge of what immortals could do.

She mentally prepared herself for something bad. From Nie Huaisang's occasional glance at Jiang Wanyin, he expected something bad to happen to him. With the way things were going, and seeing the love of his life now hurting himself again trying to find a cure...that bad thing was Hanguang-Jun's Bichen.

MianMian couldn't take Hanguang-Jun in a fight, but she was ready to quickly put herself between them if needed.

**When Wen Qing brought breakfast the next day, he was passed out with dozens of books and scrolls on the table. She set down the food, noticing another tray of ignored food. She turned back to him, "Eat something. Jiang-guniang cooked for you. You have to eat to gain your strength."**

**When he didn't respond, she continued, "Jiang Cheng's small wounds are healing well. The whip scars are also fading, but he won't eat or sleep. I treated him with needles as per Jiang-guniang's request. He is asleep now." Wei Wuxian still didn't react, so she started to leave, "Go see your Shijie. She is worried about you."**

**Jiang Yanli continued to care for Jiang Cheng, "A-Cheng, you have to get well soon. A-Die said that we, disciples of Jiang, should endure great setbacks. Don't give up. A-Xian and I will figure out a way." She sat back, and wet the cloth again, then moved to eat.**

**Wei Wuxian was standing in the doorway, "Shijie."**

That was one way to draw him out of his obsession.

Jiang Yanli sent a small thanks to Wen Qing. Maybe the Burial Mounds weren't too terrible if she knew how to look after A-Xian.

"I just can't get used to it," Her husband muttered, "How can he value his life so little?"

"We were all we had," She admitted, "If I were stronger..."

If she weren't so weak, she wouldn't have needed a protector. Her face was lesser known. If she'd been the one to go out to get supplies no one would have been captured. If she could hold her own in a fight maybe A-Xian and A-Cheng would have let her help, instead of going off to find Baoshan Sanren without her.

"You are strong," Her husband handed their son back over to her, "Because you are kind."

Ah, she had said as much to her father-in-law, but that was more directed at Lianfeng-Zun. With every revelation the small man grew more distressed. She wanted nothing more than to reassure him that whatever it was he was worried about, they wouldn't hate him. Hadn't he seen that she herself stood by when her mother was being terrible to A-Xian?

Whatever the Jin Sect did to the Wen, it wasn't completely his fault. It was difficult to oppose one's parents, even more so for someone who could be disregarded so easily.

**Wei Wuxian was dishevelled, but she smiled, "A-Xian."**



**Then he started coughing.**

**“Shijie,” He helped her stand, “Shijie, you haven’t recovered completely. Don’t stay up late. Get some sleep.”**

**“A-Xian,” She grabbed his arm, “Come here.” She brought him away, “A-Xian,” They sat down, and she brushed some of his hair to caress his face, “A-Xian. You are tired.”**

**Wei Wuxian shook his head, “No, I’m not. I have to read more books. There must be records about how to make a core again. But the books are not enough here. I wish we were at Cloud Recesses. No. Cloud Recesses was burnt. The books were burnt. Who else can help me?”**

**His expression lit up and his breath hitched, “Lan Zhan. Lan Zhan will help me, Shijie.”**

Lan Xichen tried not to let those words affect him.

Wei Wuxian was who everyone leaned on in hard times. Whether or not they wanted to, they depended on him to win the war.

But when Wei Wuxian was desperate, he turned to Wangji.

**“Wangji,” He tried to draw his brother from his thoughts, “You might not have reclaimed Cloud Recesses yet.”**

It was hard to tell how much time had passed. Wei Wuxian could read fast, but surely not that fast. Wen Chao was arrogant enough to leave investigating Wen Ning’s visit until he exhausted his list of other suspects. They had time, and he was hesitant to ask how long it took them to get to Yiling.

Either way, Wangji would be busy either reclaiming Cloud Recesses or rebuilding it.

Wei Wuxian had no way of knowing and he wouldn’t risk it.

**“I know,” Wangji admitted reluctantly.**

It didn’t make anything better.

**Her eyes grew unbearably sad at his words. He tried to get up and she grabbed his arm tighter, “A-Xian. Come.” She gripped both arms, “A-Xian. You are tired. You have to take a rest. I don’t want you to collapse when A-Cheng gets better.”**

**“Shijie,” Wei Wuxian replied, “Maybe it’s all my fault.”**

**“What are you saying?” Her eyes filled with tears.**

**“Maybe Madam Yu was right,” Wei Wuxian admitted, “I am the one to blame.”**

**Jiang Yanli let him go in disbelief, “To blame for what?”**

**He didn't answer.**

**She started crying, "The death of my parents? The massacre of the Jiang Sect? The loss of A-Cheng's golden core? It has come to this situation. Blaming won't help or change anything." She sat down, "A-Xian. My parents are gone. A-Cheng is ill. We have to live on our own now. You are my only family. I can't lose you either. Or I will really be the only one in the world."**

**Wei Wuxian slowly knelt, grabbing her arm, "Shijie."**

**She took his hand, "A-Xian. You promised me. We will go back to Lotus Pier. Don't you remember?"**

**Wei Wuxian finally started crying, and he leaned forward to cry on her.**

"You can reach him when no one else can," Jin Zixuan comforted.

"People don't realize how much he listens," A-Li replied, "He doesn't like to admit when he's hurt."

Jin Zixuan was tired of feeling terrible, but he couldn't dismiss his guilt. As he'd done the last few times he'd felt bad for Wei Wuxian, he turned his attention to his brother. Guangyao always seemed strained by the words said to him, but did he internalize them? If even Wei Wuxian couldn't brush off words spewed in obvious hatred and jealousy, could Guangyao?

Who could reach Guangyao though?

Certainly not him.

**That's what Wen Qing saw when she checked on them, and she started crying as well. Then she went back to the library. She started organizing the texts and pouring through them herself.**

**When Wei Wuxian returned in the morning, he was the one bearing breakfast while she had worked through the night. He set it down next to her, and went to the other desk, "Wen Qing, I made the porridge for you. You have to eat to gain strength."**

Jiang Cheng shook his head.

Wei Wuxian's cooking was terrible. Poor Wen Qing.

But at least A-Jie drew him out of the worst of it.

Things would get better soon...as long as his disappearance wasn't somehow worse than everything that had happened before now.

Jiang Cheng didn't think that was possible.

**An indeterminable amount of time passed where they worked as such.**

**Wei Wuxian eventually found a scroll that brought a smile to his face. It faded as he read through it. He soon went outside.**

**Wen Qing joined him.**

**They both stared at the trees, before Wei Wuxian said, “I found a way to save Jiang Cheng.”**

**She tilted her head, “How?”**

**“You can transfer my core to him.” Wei Wuxian said.**

**“Impossible,” Lan Qiren dismissed.**

**Golden cores weren’t something that could simply be transferred to someone else.**

**If that were true, then there would be no need for anyone to train. There would be no point to hard work if golden cores could be switched around so easily. Anyone with power would be trapped and stripped of it in a vicious cycle without end.**

**“Are you certain?” Jin Guangshan inquired.**

**“A Golden Core Transfer has never been hypothesized in any of our texts,” Lan Qiren drew himself up, projecting authority.**

**It had to be impossible, and people had to believe it was impossible.**

**This was just desperation. Wei Wuxian would soon find Song Xichen and his miracle.**

**She rose, “No.”**

**“Listen to me, Wen-guniang,” He stood and followed her back into the library.**

**“No,” She repeated, “You can’t do that.”**

**“Please think about it again,” Wei Wuxian insisted, “It’s the only way to save Jiang Cheng.” Thunder rumbled in the distance, “Wen-guniang, I’m serious.”**

**“Definitely not,” She refused again.**

**“We have no other way if we don’t do this,” Wei Wuxian argued.**

**“I can’t do that,” Wen Qing countered, “You...” She trailed off when Wen Ning ran into the room. They just stared at each other, both waiting for the other to give in.**

**“Perhaps Wen Qing invented the method?” Jin Guangshan mused, “She is quite the skilled doctor.”**

**“And motivated,” Zixun agreed, “Considering her closeness to Wen Zhuliu.”**

She strove to help people, to undo harm. She felt guilty about the actions of her Sect. Why wouldn't that apply to the actions of Wen Zhuliu? So a young Wen Qing set her mind on fixing a melted core.

There was no way to do so. She must have then looked into giving the afflicted a new core.

Golden core formation was only possible at a young age. Anyone old enough to have theirs melted was beyond the age they could form another.

So a transfer was the only solution. Take the core from someone, maybe an elder, maybe someone who was unable to fight for other reasons, and give it to the afflicted. It wasn't as though a golden core was necessary to live, so taking it away wouldn't mean someone died. She wouldn't be killing anyone.

Jin Guangshan had never considered sparing her life before. She had never seemed useful enough.

Not until now.

**"Jie," Wen Ning started hesitantly, "What's wrong?"**

**"Do you know what it will cost you?" Wen Qing asked. Wei Wuxian averted his gaze, "You-"**

**"You just have to do me this favor," Wei Wuxian interrupted, "I'll finish the rest."**

Nie Huaisang's heart filled with dread.

Finish the rest? Was that all this had been? Was going into exile just his way of ensuring no one would find out the truth?

Had Wei Wuxian tried to kill himself? If Wen Qing hadn't gone to him, desperate for his help and protection, would he have disappeared? As soon as the Jiang Sect was secure, and his sister happily married, would that be the end?

Because a secret like that would eventually be exposed as long as he was in a cultivation Sect. He couldn't keep everyone at arm's length forever.

It was easy to be angry when others hurt Wei Wuxian. It was heart wrenching to see him sacrifice himself.

**Wen Qing glanced towards the text.**

**"Jie, if you are talking about Jiang-gongzi's wounds," Wen Ning interjected, "Please save him. I owe them. Wen Chao won't find out if we send them away as soon as they are recovered."**

**"You know Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian lowered his voice, "He's a naturally ambitious person, he focuses too much on gain and loss. Cultivation is his life." Wen Qing let out a**

**shaky breath, her eyes rimming red, “If he can only be a mediocre person, the rest of his life will be ruined.”**

**“And what about you?” She snapped.**

What happened to Wei Wuxian didn't matter to Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian valued his brother above all else, even his cultivation in theory.

Baxia trembled, and he clenched his hands into fists. Theoretical or not, it was a hell of a sacrifice for someone who choked him not too long ago in these memories. Huaisang had asked him repeatedly over the years to give up his cultivation, to choose a longer life. And he'd refused him at every turn, deciding to keep his suffering a secret from everyone in his life.

Was this what upset Huaisang? That Wei Wuxian was willing to make a sacrifice such as this for Jiang Wanyin, and Nie Mingjue was unwilling to do something similar?

He prayed for the swift arrival of Song Zichen.

There was no good way to say he was unwilling to make that sacrifice without making it sound like he loved Huaisang less than his cultivation.

**“Jie?” Wen Ning pressed, concerned.**

**She looked away and closed her eyes, looking even closer to tears. When she opened them, she'd made her decision, “I can only give you fifty percent assurance.”**

**“Fifty percent is okay,” Wei Wuxian decided, “At least there's half a chance of success.”**

**Wen Ning smiled, “Thank goodness. Jiang-gongzi can be saved.”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded to him, but his smile didn't last as he turned to Wen Qing, “Thank you.”**

**Wen Qing stared at him in disbelief as he started to walk out. She then closed her eyes again to fight back tears and stared after him.**

Madam Jin narrowed her eyes at her husband.

Fifty percent was certainly not okay. She started planning Jiang Cheng's wedding to Wen Qing in her head. It had to be as soon as possible. Make sure any invitation to Lanling was completely inappropriate.

There were enough suspicious bodies around Guangshan.

They didn't need him going after accomplished cultivators as well.

That would certainly be discovered and their Sect shamed.

**Wei Wuxian went out and flagrantly used his spiritual power to catch a chicken, “There’s no rabbit, but a chicken will do,” He grinned, but it abruptly died as he noticed the presence of another. He picked his way through the tall grass, stopping when he found a blindfolded Song Lan on the ground, unconscious.**

Many sighs of relief were heard.

Good. Song Zichen meant Xiao Xingchen, which meant Baoshan Sanren.

There wouldn’t be a golden core transfer.

They wouldn’t have to watch Wei Wuxian commit a sacrifice the rest of them couldn’t imagine.

**He brought him to Wen Qing, who examined his eyes. He then hurried to take the tray of food away from Jiang Yanli, “Let me. You take a rest.”**

**“I’m alright,” She assured him, “Did he wake up?”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, “Yes, he just woke up. Wen-guniang is examining his wounds.”**

**Jiang Yanli walked with him back to the new patient. Wen Qing met him outside the small room.**

**“Is he alright?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**“Yes,” Wen Qing answered, “But...Don’t worry. He’ll recover in a few days.”**

**Wei Wuxian walked past her and handed the tray to Wen Ning. He took one bowl and bent down, “Song Lan, drink this medicinal concoction first.” He took his hand and placed it on the bowl.**

**“Wei-gongzi,” Song Lan started, “I didn’t expect to meet you here.”**

Jiang Cheng almost sagged in relief at his recognition.

Of course Song Zichen would remember Wei Wuxian. It wasn’t every day one met the martial nephew of their cultivation partner while trying to arrest a lunatic murderer.

He had been unconscious for most of this time, so he was never certain how they came up with a solution to his problem, but he took comfort in this interaction. Wei Wuxian wouldn’t reveal how exactly to get to the mountain.

**“I wanted to ask you. How did you get here?” Wei Wuxian pressed, “And who hurt you?”**

**Song Lan paused, and shakily set the bowl down, “After separating from your group, I traveled around with Xingchen. A few months ago, I rushed back to the Snow White Pavilion to celebrate my master’s birthday.” He inhaled shakily, “Unexpectedly, when I got back to the Snow White Pavilion...”**

**He trailed off, but everyone understood that to mean he found them massacred. Wen Ning asked, “Who was it?”**

**“Xue Yang!” Song Lan hissed vehemently, “He slaughtered the Snow White Pavilion and tortured my master for more than ten days. He was hidden on the roof and waited to attack me when I was distracted.”**

**“Xue Yang took revenge on Xiao Xingchen by...” Wen Ning trailed off.**

By blinding Song Lan.

Lan Wangji could think of no better revenge. Xue Yang wanted to make Xiao Xingchen miserable, to cause him to suffer before he went for the kill. But Xiao Xingchen had no one but Song Lan, so he went for Song Lan’s Sect.

One’s suffering was the other’s suffering.

He empathized. It was much the same watching Wei Ying struggle, hearing him offer up his own golden core. It made him wish he could go back to the war and be more ruthless.

Lan Wangji had always dreamed of a future like theirs.

Yet even without all the Sect politics, they were met with tragedy.

**“And then?” Wei Wuxian pressed.**

**“Then I became drowsy...” Song Lan paused, “By the way, in a trance, I seemed to see Xingchen. He told me that he was taking me to see his Master, Baoshan Sanren. She could heal my eyes.”**

**“Baoshan Sanren?” Wen Qing echoed.**

**“The legendary seclusive cultivator who was said to be able to revive the dead and give flesh to bones!” Wen Ning continued excitedly.**

Song Lan nodded, “Exactly. He took me to Yiling. Aside from that, I don’t know anything else.” He inhaled, “Then I met Wei-gongzi.”

**“What about Baoshan Sanren?” Wen Qing asked, “Is she here?”**

Song Lan started to shake his head, but Wei Wuxian intervened, “Let Song Lan rest first.”

**“But...” Wen Qing looked hopeful.**

**“Baoshan Sanren is my grandmaster,” Wei Wuxian interjected, “How could I not know where she is?”**

**“You mean she can...” Jiang Yanli stepped closer.**

**“Yes, Shijie,” Wei Wuxian replied, “Jiang Cheng can be saved.”**

“Wei Wuxian and his memory,” Jiang Wanyin bit out.

Was it just Wei Wuxian’s strange memory?

It seemed suspicious that simply meeting Song Zichen out in the wilderness would bring back memories of where the Immortal could be. Then again, what did they know about Baoshan Sanren’s movements?

Wei Wuxian just seemed too desperate for any connection to his mother.

But had he ever been free to seek Baoshan Sanren before? Even now, if it weren’t for finding Song Zichen he wouldn’t have dared leave Jiang Wanyin and Jiang Yanli alone to find her. It was only because she was possibly so close that he came to that solution.

**With that, he retrieved food and went to wake Jiang Cheng up. He carefully removed the needles from his head and moved to the table. He waited a moment before speaking, “You’re awake. Come here. It’s time for dinner.” He ate some chicken, “Jiang Cheng. Do you really want to die?”**

**“I can’t seek revenge when I’m alive,” Jiang Cheng rasped, “Why should I be alive then?” Wei Wuxian paused while eating to listen, “Maybe I’ll be able to turn into a ferocious ghost.”**

**Wei Wuxian scoffed, “You underwent a soul-calming ceremony when you were little. You won’t be able to turn into a ferocious ghost after you die.”**

**“If I can’t get revenge regardless of if I’m dead or alive, then what’s the difference between the two?” Jiang Cheng asked.**

**“But if you don’t replenish your strength,” Wei Wuxian gestured, “How can we go and take back your golden core?” Jiang Cheng turned towards him, and he continued, “That’s right. Don’t doubt it. You didn’t hear me wrong. What I said is, ‘take back your golden core’.”**

Jin Guangyao noted the careful color changes in these scenes.

Everything about the golden core transfer had been Wen Qing. Everything to do with Baoshan Sanren had been Wei Wuxian, with some input from the Jiangs.

Everyone seemed so caught up in what was being done in the memories to consider why they were being shown them at all.

He shifted in his seat, trying not to draw Er-ge’s attention. Why would Wen Qing reveal the potential of a golden core transfer if she knew Wei Wuxian would simply end up going to Baoshan Sanren? Was it to show the depth of his loyalty to the Jiang Sect? What was the point of showing what someone would theoretically do with no other choice?

It was better to show only what was done.



Jin Guangyao couldn't comprehend such a sacrifice. Was that why no one loved him? Because he couldn't love anyone so completely?

**"Do you know how?" Jiang Cheng demanded.**

**"Hm. I do," Wei Wuxian confirmed, smirking slightly, "You already know that my mother, Cangse Sanren, was the pupil of Baoshan Sanren." Jiang Cheng shakily pushed himself up, "Baoshan Sanren is a legendary cultivator who has lived for hundreds of years, and is a seclusive master who is said to be able to revive the dead and give flesh to bones!"**

**"You mean..." Jiang Cheng trailed off, "You mean..."**

**"I mean that I know how to save you," Wei Wuxian replied, "And I know that the name Baoshan means embracing mountains. In other words, I can take you to see Baoshan Sanren."**

Oh, Wei Wuxian was so clever with words.

He hid his lies among misguiding truths, if he was planning what Nie Huaisang thought he was planning.

**"But..." Jiang Cheng looked confused, "Didn't you say you can't remember things from when you were younger?"**

**Wei Wuxian pulled the chicken out of his mouth, "It's not that I can't remember anything at all. There are a few memory pieces that repeated many times and I still remember them. I always remember the voice of a woman repeating something to me, telling me a thing and a place. The voice said that if I find myself in an absolutely desperate situation, I can go up the mountain and ask the immortal one on the mountain for help."**

**Jiang Cheng stumbled out of the bed and hobbled over to the table, "You mean-"**

It was nice to see the hope return to his eyes.

Lan Xichen was starting to fear it never would. Distraught was not a good look for Jiang Wanyin. It didn't fit him. He was a man with a quick temper, and while he sometimes hesitated to take action, he seldom did nothing.

It was a terrible question to consider, if he would give up his golden core to Wangji.

As a Sect Leader, he got used to others making sacrifices for him. Uncle stayed behind to cover his retreat. He tried his best to be careful on the battlefield, but there must be times where a disciple died protecting him. Even before the war, on night hunts, his safety and wellbeing were the priority, even if it cost the others.

He couldn't just be Wangji's brother. Just as Jiang Wanyin wasn't just Wei Wuxian's brother.

Accepting those sacrifices didn't get easier.

**“Sit down first,” Wei Wuxian interrupted.**

**“I-”**

**“Let’s not talk now.” He passed him food, “Eat first.”**

**“But-”**

**“We can talk while eating,” Wei Wuxian allowed, “Or else I won’t say anything.”**

**Jiang Cheng shoved the food into his mouth without another word of argument. Wei Wuxian passed him more, “This is for you. Eat your fill.” He watched him eat, “I’ll take you there in a few days.”**

**“Today!” Jiang Cheng demanded.**

**“Tomorrow,” Wei Wuxian compromised, “We have to help Shijie settle down. It’s not suitable for her to go with us.” Jiang Cheng agreed, but looked nervous, “What are you scared of? Those immortal ones age for hundreds of years, they won’t disappear all of a sudden. Besides, there are many taboos while meeting them. I’ll have to tell you one by one. Or else, if you should do something forbidden, and anger the grandmaster, both of us would be over.”**

**Jiang Cheng nodded.**

**Taboos?**

**Well, that would explain some of the gaps in the explanation. Not just anyone could approach the Immortal. If it was a guarded secret, then Wei Wuxian had no reason to speak of them.**

**But how did he remember all those rules?**

**Many shook their heads. Wei Wuxian was beyond comprehension sometimes.**

**At night, Wen Qing waited for Wei Wuxian. She opened the door before he could even knock.**

**She walked away, hearing him mutter, “In terms of bothering others, she’s really as good as Jiang Cheng.” He then followed her, sitting at the other table, “Actually, I’m here just to tell you that Song-xiong’s eyes recovered very quickly. He will soon be able to see things. Then he can leave soon.”**

**Wen Qing continued examining her text, “We have violated the rules, taking in so many people the Wen Sect is looking for. Another one doesn’t matter.”**

**“You’re right,” Wei Wuxian agreed, “By the way, I have asked Song-xiong to take Shijie away to meet up with Lan Zhan and the Jin Sect.”**

**Wen Qing froze, then blinked a few times before flipping the page. She didn’t respond.**

**“Wen Qing,” Wei Wuxian continued, “Could you give me some tranquilizing powder? I want the kind that can make people sleep for a whole day.”**

**She grabbed an already prepared packet and moved it so he could see. He came over to retrieve it, “Thanks.” He threw it up and caught it.**

Jiang Yanli shook her head.

She wished she could have gone with them, even if it was just to the foot of the mountain.

Maybe then Wei Wuxian would have been more careful. Maybe then he wouldn't have disappeared without a trace.

**As he walked away, she asked, “Have you thought about what if Jiang Cheng finds out about the truth?”**

**Wei Wuxian froze this time, “There is no what if. He will never find out.”**

**Wen Qing smiled ruefully, “There is no what if? You can hide the truth from him for a while, but can you hide it for the rest of his life?”**

**Wei Wuxian turned around, “Wen Qing. If today it had been Wen Ning who was wounded like that, I'm sure you would be the same as me. You'd make the same choice.” She stared at him, and he offered a small smile as he raised the packet in silent thanks.**

That...certainly didn't sound like a simple visit to an Immortal.

But a few looks at Jiang Wanyin froze all questions.

Maybe it was one of the taboos. Maybe Wei Wuxian would pay a price since he was asking for a favor for an adopted brother rather than seeking her out because he needed something. Maybe she would take offense to the request and he warned Wen Qing that there was a cost to asking an Immortal for assistance.

Maybe this was why he disappeared for three months.

**Jiang Yanli was tending to Jiang Cheng when Wei Wuxian arrived, just in time to stop her from stumbling, “Shijie.”**

**She smiled, “A-Xian.”**

**“Shijie,” He repeated. She shushed him, but he continued, “Shijie, I bring-”**

**“Jiang Cheng just fell asleep,” She interrupted, “Don't disturb him.”**

**“He had enough sleep,” Wei Wuxian pouted.**

**“A-Xian,” She insisted.**

**He lowered his voice, “I’ll keep it low, okay?”**

**She smiled again, “Let’s talk over there, okay?” Then she brought him to the table.**

Jiang Cheng’s doubt grew, but he remembered this conversation.

Surely if Wei Wuxian was planning...that, his goodbye would have been more obvious.

He wouldn’t have made such a promise and not meant it.

Wei Wuxian was a self-sacrificial idiot, but surely not enough to do...he couldn’t even think of it. He brushed his hand over his chest, feeling the familiar thrum of his golden core.

*His golden core.*

It had to be. He would know if it wasn’t. If he had Wei Wuxian’s golden core, he’d be stronger. He’d be just as capable as him, and he wasn’t. So it couldn’t be true.

**“Shijie, I don’t think you’ve slept well these days. I specifically asked Wen Qing for some incense powder,” Wei Wuxian held up the packet, “Which can calm the mind. You can put it in the incense burner.”**

**She accepted, sniffing it once then moving to put it in the incense burner, “A-Xian. I haven’t seen you all afternoon. Where have you been? Have you had your dinner?”**

**Wei Wuxian hummed, “Wait a minute, Shijie. This smell is...” He lifted the lid of a nearby pot, “Surely lotus root and rib soup!”**

**“I left some especially for you,” Jiang Yanli started serving him, “But compared with the soup made in Yunmeng, it tastes a little different. Have a try.”**

**He sniffed it, “It smells great! Shijie...Do you remember the first time you made lotus root and rib soup for me?”**

**She smiled, “I do. At that time, A-Die had just brought you into our family.”**

**“Yes,” Wei Wuxian agreed, “It was the first time I came to Lotus Pier. So I was terrified to death, especially afraid of Jiang Cheng’s puppies.” He laughed, “Shijie, it seems that Jiang Cheng has been proud since he was a child.”**

**“Food and memory,” Nie Huaisang sighed.**

MianMian just nodded in agreement. She could see now what her friend was so scared of. No one else seemed to truly believe Wei Wuxian would go through with the golden core transfer.

She did. He dove in front of a hot iron that could have damaged his meridians and nerves for her, a girl from another Sect he didn’t even like. He risked himself to save Wen Ning from the Waterborne Abyss and the Wen Sect was obviously their enemy.

What would he do for Jiang Wanyin, his brother? What would he consider fulfilling his promise to Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian?

Giving up his core would also make demonic cultivation his only option.

**With that, Wei Wuxian shared a memory of a further back time. He was a small child, holding tightly to Jiang Fengmian's hand as they approached someone's room.**

**They could hear another child screaming, "It ticks me off! Why? Why?" Wei Wuxian clutched his pillow in his other hand, hiding half his face in it. He could slightly see Jiang Cheng throwing things around, "Why? Why did they send all my puppies away? Why? It ticks me off! Why?"**

**Jiang Fengmian knelt down, "A-Xian. You don't have to be afraid. A-Cheng is a good boy. He'll be alright in a few days."**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, "I'm sorry, Jiang-shushu. I've put you in trouble."**

**Jiang Yanli watched them from a nearby hall.**

**"A-Xian," Jiang Fengmian gripped his shoulders, "At Lotus Pier, you don't have to apologize for what you didn't do wrong. Keep that in mind, okay?"**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, smiling shyly.**

And yet they still blamed him for everything.

Lan Wangji tempered his rage with the sight of a young Wei Ying. This was right after he was taken off the streets. This was his first night in Lotus Pier.

"Why did you have to share a room?" Lianfeng-Zun asked.

"Because there were no other rooms in the family wing," Jiang Yanli answered, "We wanted him to feel welcome."

Jin Zixuan snorted, "So you got rid of the puppies."

And created a situation where Wei Ying felt like a burden from the very beginning. The imbalance in their relationship started so early, a debt that could never be fully paid, even by sacrificing his own golden core.

Lan Wangji couldn't believe that happened. He just...couldn't.

Demonic cultivation could be fixed. Having no golden core couldn't. At least, not through any method he knew of, and every moment Wei Ying lived without one was time the emptiness would eat at him.

**Jiang Fengmian touched his cheek gently, then left. Wei Wuxian shivered on the ground, working up his courage to go and knock on the door, "Shidi! Shidi! Let me in! I need to sleep?"**

**“Who are you calling Shidi?” Jiang Cheng demanded, “Give me my puppies back! Princess, Jasmine, and Little Love! How could they take them away just because you’re afraid of them? They are my dogs! It’s my house! It’s all mine! Why can you live here?”**

**Wei Wuxian waited, then the door opened and Jiang Cheng threw out his bedding, “Go away! If I see you again,” He pointed at him, “I’ll let a group of dogs bite you!”**

**Scared, Wei Wuxian stepped back, “I’ll go. I’ll go.” He turned and started running, “Don’t send the dogs!”**

Nie Huaisang managed a shaky laugh.

Jiang Cheng had always been all talk when it came to Wei Wuxian. He knew as soon as Wei Wuxian ran away Jiang Cheng felt guilty. It was just a pity that Wei Wuxian listened to too much of that talk.

But this was important to Jiang Cheng as well. If it hadn’t been for Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng could have ended up like Jin Zixuan. Somehow, he didn’t imagine Jiang Cheng managing to change for love. Maybe he still would have met Wen Qing and she would have verbally eviscerated him, but he’d have been intolerable until then.

Nie Huaisang let himself relish in this calm before the storm.

As much as he wanted to be angry at the circumstances and influences leading up to this choice, he still respected Wei Wuxian’s choice. He could understand a brother being worth everything.

Even if his own didn’t.

**The memory skipped to Jiang Yanli in the woods with a lantern, “A-Xian!” She searched, “Wei Wuxian! A-Xian! Wei Wuxian!” She alternated her address until she saw him. He had somehow climbed a tree, and was clinging desperately to a branch. She approached the tree, “A-Xian. Why are you on a tree?”**

**When he didn’t reply, she continued, “A-Xian, I see you. Your shoes have fallen under the tree.”**

**He shifted to look down, “My shoes!”**

**“Come down,” Jiang Yanli requested, “Let’s go home.”**

**“No,” Wei Wuxian refused, “I won’t. There are dogs.”**

**“There are no dogs,” Jiang Yanli soothed, “It was A-Cheng who lied to you. How long have you been on that tree? Your hands will get very tired if you go on like this. Come on.”**

**“Just go!” Wei Wuxian shouted, “I won’t fall down.” He started to climb higher.**

**“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli scolded.**

**His foot slipped, and he started to fall. She ran forward, “A-Xian!” She almost caught him, but he landed hard on the ground.**

Where were their parents? This wasn’t something a child should handle alone.

Jin Zixuan barely stopped himself from asking. He felt like he knew the answer. Jiang Fengmian brought Wei Wuxian home. Odds were, Madam Yu was already fighting him. Both A-Li and Jiang Wanyin could tell that Wei Wuxian making any sort of trouble would only make things worse.

So they took it upon themselves to fix it.

“We’ve only ever had each other,” A-Li whispered.

He didn’t realize how far back that went.

**Wei Wuxian clutched his leg, “Oh, it hurts a lot. My leg is broken!”**

**Jiang Yanli checked, “It isn’t broken. It’s just scratched!”**

**“It hurts!” Wei Wuxian insisted, curling into himself.**

**“Sit still,” She held his leg, “Let me carry you home.”**

**Wei Wuxian looked scared, “Have the dogs come yet?”**

**“Dogs? No,” Jiang Yanli promised, “If they come, I’ll drive them away for you.”**

**“It hurts a lot,” Wei Wuxian complained.**

**Jiang Yanli went and grabbed his shoes as he complained, “Come on.” She slipped one of his feet into one, “Your shoes. Do they not fit you?”**

**“No,” Wei Wuxian denied, “They fit me well.”**

**She got it on, “They’re just a little big.”**

**“This is the first gift Jiang-shushu gave me,” Wei Wuxian revealed.**

So it didn’t matter if it didn’t fit right.

Wei Wuxian wouldn’t complain.

But here he verbally expressed his pain. When did that change? When he developed a golden core strong enough to heal minor injuries? When he got to know Madam Yu better? When the beatings began?

He had been such a sweet boy.

And they all had a hand in ruining him.

**“It’s alright,” Jiang Yanli soothed, “I’ll go back and change it for you.”**

**“You don’t have to,” Wei Wuxian replied.**

**She got his other shoe on, then got him to climb onto her back. She retrieved the lantern, then started back towards Lotus Pier, “A-Xian. No matter what Jiang Cheng said to you just now, just ignore him. He is bad-tempered and often plays alone at home.”**

**“Those little puppies were the apples of his eye. Now that A-Die sent them away, he is very sad. However, he was happy to have a friend with him. He just couldn’t say it out loud. You didn’t come back after a while. He was so worried about you that he woke me up anxiously. So I came out to find you. Do you understand now?”**

**Wei Wuxian stayed silent, but as they got closer they heard someone else crying. She looked around and found her other brother sitting in the tall grass, “A-Cheng!”**

**“A-Jie!” Jiang Cheng called back.**

**“A-Cheng,” She ran towards him, “Come here.” She set Wei Wuxian down and crouched by the younger boy, who was bleeding from his forehead. She pulled out a cloth to wipe his face, “A-Cheng. It’s okay now. Didn’t I ask you to bring some people to find A-Xian?” He started crying louder, “It’s okay.”**

**“What would they do without you?” Jin Zixuan asked.**

**Quite thoughtlessly, in Lan Xichen’s opinion, but maybe the younger man just felt a need to fill the silence.**

**They were both without her now. Wei Wuxian exiled to the Burial Mounds, missing both her wedding and the birth of her child. Jiang Wanyin barely found the time to leave Lotus Pier and his rebuilding Sect.**

**They struggled without each other.**

**They suffered without each other.**

**Yet they suffered with each other too, didn’t they? Misery loves company, and it was already obvious the only person Wei Wuxian felt comfortable showing his misery to was Jiang Yanli.**

**Jiang Cheng got quieter when he saw Wei Wuxian standing there with the lantern. Jiang Yanli looked between the two of them, “You have something to say to A-Xian, don’t you?”**

**“I’m sorry,” Jiang Cheng sobbed.**

**“It doesn’t matter,” Wei Wuxian dismissed.**

**“A-Cheng,” Jiang Yanli cupped his face, “Did you take A-Xian’s quilt back first?”**



**“I’ve already taken it back,” Jiang Cheng said.**

**She smiled, and dabbed at his forehead again. Slowly, she helped him stand, “Come on. Easy.” Jiang Cheng bowed his head and cried, while Wei Wuxian continued to just stand there. After a moment, Jiang Cheng scratched his head and started to smile, and Wei Wuxian mirrored him.**

**“You two,” Jiang Yanli sighed, “What should I do with you guys?”**

**She got Wei Wuxian on her back again. This time, Jiang Cheng carried the lantern as they walked back to Lotus Pier.**

And that was all it took for him to be adopted by his siblings.

Jin Guangyao tried not to be jealous. He failed. All his ambitions in the Jin Sect...they truly were naive. He was too late to ever be accepted, to ever be loved. There was blood on his hands and scars on his soul. He would never be innocent, never be worthy of anyone’s love.

His father was the reason he had that blood on his hands.

Maybe it would be fitting to finally be the villain Madam Jin believed he was. The usurping bastard who was willing to kill his own blood. Maybe it took a monster to take down another monster. He’d make his father regret honing the skills he did to hide his crimes.

And then it could all be over. This wasn’t a game he could win, not even by cheating.

All that was left was to give up.

**Back in their rooms, both boys got dressed in their sleep clothes. Wei Wuxian rubbed absentmindedly at his leg, darting nervous glances at Jiang Cheng, who rubbed at his head. Thoughtfully, Wei Wuxian brought his hand up to tap at his nose, then he got up and hobbled over, “Don’t worry. I won’t tell Jiang-shushu. It was me who wanted to climb trees at night and then my leg got scratched.”**

**Jiang Cheng smiled, and got up to meet him halfway, “Okay, you also don’t have to worry about dogs in the future. I’ll help you chase them away.” He held out his hand.**

**Wei Wuxian grinned and grasped it. They started laughing and playing after that.**

**That’s how Jiang Yanli found them when she brought food, “This is the soup I cooked tonight. There is still some left. Drink it while it’s warm.”**

**Jiang Cheng grabbed Wei Wuxian’s hand, “Jie’s lotus root and rib soup is the most delicious. Come and drink.”**

**They sat on one side of the table together as Jiang Yanli served them, “Come on. Have a drink.” She passed over one dish, “This is yours.” She watched Wei Wuxian hesitate where Jiang Cheng was already eating, “Drink it,” She encouraged.**

Jiang Wanyin offered protection. Jiang Yanli offered comfort.

It started out so simple, so beautiful.

**Back in Yiling, Wei Wuxian set down his empty bowl, “I can still remember that lotus root and rib soup even more.” Jiang Cheng cried on the bed.**

**Jiang Yanli grabbed Wei Wuxian’s hand, “A-Xian. You, me, A-Cheng, the three of us. The three of us must be together forever and never be parted.”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, “And never be parted.”**

Many in the room couldn’t hide how those words affected them.

It was obvious now that Wei Wuxian’s departure from the Jiang Sect wasn’t what either of them wanted. It was what the cultivation world demanded. Similarly with his exile to the Burial Mounds and separation from his sister.

Even if the demonic cultivation twisted him, they couldn’t see him causing harm to either of them.

Would they be together if it wasn’t for their actions?

As much as they wanted to blame Wei Wuxian for becoming the Yiling Patriarch, he hadn’t declared himself such. They named him that.

**The powder soon took effect, and Jiang Yanli fell asleep on the table, “Shijie,” Wei Wuxian placed a hand on her back, “Shijie.”**

**Knowing she was truly unconscious, Jiang Cheng got up.**

**Wei Wuxian nodded to him, “The efficacy of this powder is enough for Song-xiong to take her away from Yiling.”**

**Jiang Cheng nodded, and watched as Wei Wuxian picked her up. They walked through the Office until they came to a horse and carriage. Song Lan was already waiting to take her away. Wen Ning and Wen Qing came out to see them off.**

**“A-Jie,” Jiang Cheng adjusted her blankets, “Wait until I get my golden core back. I’ll pick you up at Lanling right away.” With a solemn nod to Wei Wuxian, they got out.**

Wei Wuxian would have said goodbye.

Jiang Cheng clung to that. If Wei Wuxian gave him his golden core and left to keep the secret, then he would have said goodbye to A-Jie.

He repeated those words like a mantra, willing them to be true.

It was too much otherwise.

**“Song-xiong,” Jiang Cheng addressed the man, “Even after Jie wakes up, she must be sent to Lanling no matter how she reacts. You cannot let her go back.”**

**“I understand,” Song Lan replied.**

**“When Shijie wakes up, she will definitely blame me for acting on my own. I’m afraid this time she won’t cool down so easily,” Wei Wuxian worried.**

**“When has she ever really gotten angry with you?” Jiang Cheng asked.**

**Wei Wuxian smiled, “Yes, you’re right.”**

**Then they both saluted and bowed to Song Lan.**

**Song Lan grabbed their hands, “Wei-gongzi, Jiang-gongzi. You don’t have to do this.”**

**“Song-xiong,” Jiang Cheng replied, “A-Jie’s safety is entrusted to you.”**

**“I swear on my life,” Song Lan promised, “You can be sure that as long as I am alive, I’ll guarantee Jiang-guniang will arrive safely at the Jin Sect’s residence. By the way, Wei-gongzi, could you convey a few words for me? If you see Xingchen, just say...” He trailed off, then shook his head, “Nevermind. I shall say goodbye now.”**

**“Where is Xiao Xingchen?”**

**“I heard they were travelling together.”**

**“Yes, yes. How could they not find each other?”**

**“I haven’t heard anything about them.”**

**“Strange, given their earlier reputations.”**

**“...”**

**“I’m sure they’re fine. Perhaps they are simply tracking Xue Yang.”**

**Who was there really to check on them? With the destruction of the Snow White Pavilion, those two also only had each other.**

**Song Lan shifted his attention to the two watchers, “Wen-guniang. Wen-gongzi. Farewell.”**

**They said nothing, but bowed.**

**Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng watched the cart depart, then turned towards Wen Qing, “We are leaving too.”**

**“Wen-guniang,” Jiang Cheng looked at her, “Thank you for nursing and caring for us.” He bowed, “Farewell.” He then turned and walked a few steps away.**

**Wen Qing stared after him.**

**“Wen Qing. Don’t blame him,” Wei Wuxian said, “After all, what happened in Lotus Pier-”**

**“You don’t have to explain it,” Wen Qing interrupted, “If I were him, I would have behaved worse.” Wei Wuxian nodded, “Did you really think it over?”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded again, “I never hesitated.” She held his gaze, and he smiled slightly, then nodded to Wen Ning and joined his brother. Wei Wuxian lifted a hand in farewell, and Jiang Cheng stopped, almost looking back, before he walked on.**

Another hint of what was coming, but it still felt impossible.

Wasn’t the Jiang Sect’s motto attempt the impossible?

No. No one would willingly give up their golden core for another.

It had to be something else. Anything else. Wei Wuxian couldn’t be such a selfless man. Nobody so selfless would devolve into demonic cultivation. Using resentment was the realm of the selfish and arrogant.

Not the desperate without the ability to use traditional cultivation.

“Impossible,” Lan Qiren repeated to himself, willing himself to believe it.

**“Jiejie,” Wen Ning turned to his sister, who watched them disappear into the woods.**

**The next day, Wen Qing stood on top of a mountain, watching as a blindfolded Jiang Cheng approached, depending on a walking stick to prevent him from tripping. He was obviously tired. She looked at Wen Ning and nodded. Her younger brother started to ring a bell.**

**Jiang Cheng startled, but after realizing he wasn’t being attacked, set his walking stick back down.**

**She listened to him explain the situation, testing his desperation with a few questions. Then she stopped him, “That’s enough. Everything is destiny.” She unfurled a ribbon and threw it into his hand, “Hold on to the ribbon and follow me.”**

**“Thank you, Immortal One!” Jiang Cheng held on tight, “Thank you!”**

**“Stop talking, Gongzi,” Wen Qing ordered, “And never open your eyes.”**

A trick.

A terrible deception, but a necessary one.

After all, more than finding a fool who would give up their golden core, how could they find someone willing to accept such a sacrifice? Such a debt?

No, accepting would be easy.

Nie Huaisang had time to adjust to the situation. His attention was fully on Jiang Cheng. His friend's face had taken an ashen look as he realized the truth. He was subtly shaking, his head moving in denial of reality.

He did a quick check of the room. Hanguang-Jun looked like he was about to cry. That meant Er-ge wouldn't be of any help. Neither would San-ge. His own brother was barely in any state to do anything either. At least one good thing out of this reveal was that it shocked everybody.

"Go to him," MianMian advised.

Right. If Jiang Wanyin looked on the verge of a Qi deviation, then Jiang Yanli was on the verge of collapse. Already tears spilled down her face as she clutched her son and her husband closer to herself. Jin Zixuan kept her plea for this to be false muffled by his shoulder.

His own legs were shaky as he moved to sit by Jiang Cheng.

"This can't be true," His friend whispered, but didn't shove him away.

Nie Huaisang grimaced. Jiang Cheng wouldn't believe it until he saw it with his own eyes.

**She led him further up the mountain. Then she turned and knocked him unconscious with a powder. Wen Ning emerged to catch him before he could fully collapse, pulling him onto his lap, "Jie. Will he wake up?"**

**"He won't," She pulled off her hat, "Come out."**

**Wei Wuxian stood up and walked over to them. He stared at Jiang Cheng, then turned to Wen Qing, "Exchange the cores then."**

This was why he became a demonic cultivator?

Because he didn't have a golden core?

How could no one have noticed? Certainly, many suspected the resentful energy was harming his cultivation, but no one expected it to be fully gone before he even began.

A few realized that they equated strength with their golden cores. Because Wei Wuxian was so powerful on the battlefield, so successful in the crowd hunt, they assumed he had a powerful core. They equated worth with golden cores too, dismissing those with weak cultivation as though strength was all that mattered.

No wonder he kept it a secret.

They would never have let him near a battlefield if they knew the truth.

**It skipped to Wen Qing setting out her supplies. She walked over to an unconscious Wei Wuxian and placed a hand on his exposed chest. She frowned.**

**“Jie?” Wen Ning asked.**

**“I feared this would happen,” She murmured, then pulled a vial from her belt and waved it under Wei Wuxian’s nose.**

**With a slight start, Wei Wuxian woke up. He raised himself onto one arm, “Is something wrong?”**

**“When you’re asleep, your spiritual energy isn’t concentrated enough,” Wen Qing explained quickly, “You’ll need to be awake for the transfer.”**

Awake?

It was one thing to go to sleep and wake up missing a part of yourself, it was another to lie that and watch as it was systematically cut out of you. Especially something as integral to the person as a golden core. It was the well of spiritual energy within a person. It was all but tied to a person’s soul.

Lan Qiren prayed for forgiveness for every insult he’d given Wei Wuxian.

He was a far better man than anyone in this room.

**“Just me?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**“Just you,” Wen Qing confirmed, “But the pain...”**

**Wei Wuxian chuckled, and laid back down, “I can handle pain.”**

**She hesitated, then nodded, “Concentrate your energy on your core...”**

**Time skipped. Hours passed. Wei Wuxian was now tied down, Wen Ning forcefully keeping his shoulders pressed against the table as Wen Qing closed another of his meridians, forcing his energy to divert to his core. Wei Wuxian cried out.**

Lan Wangji had heard a number of Wei Ying’s cries.

There was his shout of terror when facing the beast in the Wen Sect’s dungeon.

There was his shout of surprise when Nie Huaisang snuck up on him.

But the only cry of pain he’d heard was when he was a child. He hadn’t let out a noise when he was hurt by Wen Chao. He only whined to get pity when he was branded. Even facing the Xuanwu, where he was exhausted, he was largely silent.

It was new to hear him cry out in agony.

Which only proved how much pain he was in.

**“Jiang Wanyin doesn’t deserve this,” Lan Wangji said.**

**“He does in Wei Wuxian’s eyes,” His brother replied.**

Wei Ying had terrible judgment then.

But he would have to respect his sacrifice. It was too late to change it.

“Wangji,” His brother pressed his sleeve to his cheek.

When he drew back, Lan Wangji could see it was wet.

He didn’t bother to hide his tears. Wei Ying deserved so much more than his tears.

**“Jie,” Wen Ning pressed harder, “Can’t we do this any faster?”**

**“Any faster and he dies,” Wen Qing snapped, “Give him some water.”**

**Wen Ning removed the leather strap from Wei Wuxian’s mouth, helping him sit up, “Wei-gongzi, you don’t need to do this. We can find some other way.”**

**Wei Wuxian smiled weakly, “There is no other way, Wen Ning.”**

**“But...” He trailed off as he watched the other drink, “This is torture! Why would you...”**

**Wei Wuxian sighed, falling back onto the slab of stone, “You saved us because you owed us a debt,” He said, his voice weak, “This is the same. If the Jiang Sect hadn’t taken me in, I’d still be a beggar on the street, if I was lucky enough to still be alive. I wouldn’t even have a golden core if...”**

**He closed his eyes, and Wen Ning shook him, “You need to stay awake, Wei-gongzi.”**

**“I know,” He opened them again, “Consider this my debt to the Jiang Sect.”**

“Why are you all so obsessed with debt?” Jiang Yanli sobbed.

There shouldn’t be debt between family. There shouldn’t be a debt for showing someone basic human decency. How could they even keep track?

Her father brought A-Xian to their home because he felt indebted to his parents. He never owed them anything for it, because her father believed he should have done more to prevent him from becoming an orphan and ending up on the streets in the first place.

And then he was never fully accepted.

There wasn’t a debt. There was never a debt.

“I’m sorry,” Her husband apologized as though it was his fault.

As though it were anyone’s fault. As though it weren’t everyone’s fault.

She kept crying for all the pain A-Xian went through and all the pain he must still be in. She cried for the secrets he bore in silence, all the insults about his cultivation when he never had

a choice. She even cried for Wen Qing, who could have used this time to prepare for Wen Chao's arrival but spent it here, operating to save one young man at the cost of another.

**Finally, Wen Qing's face was screwed up in concentration. Her fingers slipped into a small incision she made on Wei Wuxian's chest. A bright light softly glowed out of it, and she wrapped her fingers around it.**

**She closed her eyes and pulled.**

**The scream Wei Wuxian let out was inhuman. Wen Ning had to use all his weight to pin him down, to keep him in place.**

**In Wen Qing's hand was Wei Wuxian's golden core.**

Their ears were still ringing from the anguished cries of a man under voluntary torture, and it was with morbid fascination that they looked at the golden core. Wei Wuxian's golden

Golden cores were truly golden.

It felt wrong to see one. It was a part of a person one should never see.

It was so bright, just like Wei Wuxian's soul.

**"It's beautiful, Jie," Wen Ning whispered.**

**Wen Qing fought back tears as she turned to Jiang Cheng, "Close him up." She ordered before placing the golden core in a similar incision on Jiang Cheng's chest. As soon as it was placed she put both her hands on his chest, circulating her spiritual energy through him.**

**"Did it work?" Wei Wuxian croaked.**

**"Rest, Wei-gongzi," Wen Ning tried to get him to lay down.**

**"Did it work?" Wei Wuxian repeated.**

**Tears slid down Wen Qing's face as she kept working. She watched as the incision healed itself, and slumped in relief, "It worked."**

It worked.

A hundred moments flashed in Jiang Cheng's mind. Every time he scolded Wei Wuxian for not carrying his sword. Every moment he spent angry with him for slacking in training their new disciples. All the small arguments about how Wei Wuxian should support him.

All this time, he had been too weak. With no spiritual energy, he couldn't fight with a sword. With no golden core, he couldn't help the youngest disciples with forming their own, or the older ones through sword drills. With no power, he couldn't support him. Leaning on him just crushed him.



So Wei Wuxian left. He left to keep his secret and because staying was a reminder of all that he no longer had.

He never asked for this. He clenched his hand over his chest, the once familiar thrum of the golden core now foreign.

Jiang Cheng didn't ask for Wei Wuxian's sacrifice.

He didn't want his sacrifice.

"Jiang-xiong," Nie Huaisang said. It had to be Nie Huaisang. No one else would dare come near him after seeing how pathetic and weak he was, "Jiang Cheng. Snap out of it or you'll go into Qi deviation."

Jiang Cheng laughed. What did it matter if he Qi deviated? It wasn't like it was his core.

How was he supposed to live knowing that it was never by his own strength or merit, but by Wei Wuxian's?

"Calm down," Nie Huaisang pleaded.

Jiang Cheng felt the press of a talisman to his chest, and then nothing.

## Chapter End Notes

I may take a small break after this. Mostly because I've caught up to where I've transcribed the episodes, and it takes a lot of time to do the transcription. Expect the next chapter in around a month.

Happy Pride! From this humble asexual to all of you!

Edit 6/6/21: We reached 2,400 kudos! I'm honestly shocked. I remember starting this and thinking no one would care because it's only the CQLverse. Then it started getting attention and I thought it was starting to get so long new readers would be discouraged...

Thank you for all your support!

# Before We Get Lost, Lend Me Your Thoughts

## Chapter Summary

Can't get what we want without knowing.

## Chapter Notes

Title from Talk by Khalid

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There was an explosion of conversation as soon as Jiang Wanyin was carried out of the room. Huaisang left with him, still pouring energy into whatever talisman he used to knock him out.

“I believe we will take a break here for the night,” Jin Guangyao announced.

Da-ge and Lady Luo disappeared to follow Huaisang. Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli weren't far behind them. Hanguang-Jun was the next to leave, quickly followed by Er-ge. He wasn't sure anyone heard his announcement, but he walked to the center of the room to retrieve the orb, carefully tuning out their shock.

Was it really so surprising that Wei Wuxian was willing to give up his golden core?

Weren't they the ones who decided he was the servant while Jiang Wanyin was the master?

Weren't they the ones who told him he was worth less?

Worthless. Nothing. He was born lower so would always be lower.

“Please stay and enjoy the food prepared,” He continued, “Or feel free to retire to your rooms.” With the orb tucked away in his sleeve, he turned to bow to his father. He couldn't just leave without permission, “I will see what help I can provide Jiang-zongzhu.”

“Of course,” Jin Guangshan waved a hand distractedly.

Jin Guangyao could guess his thoughts. They always circled back to demonic cultivation, to power.

They hadn't found anyone with a talent for it yet in the Jin Sect, but it appeared they'd been going about it wrong. Wei Wuxian didn't have a core. Xue Yang's core was very weak compared to other cultivators.

Wen Ruohan was a very powerful cultivator, but Jin Guangyao had noticed how he struggled to use the Yin Iron. The reason he searched so hard for Xue Yang was because he knew Xue Yang could defeat him with his one shard of Yin Iron. Even in possession of three, the sheer amount of power he had didn't equal mastery.

From what he'd seen, mastery could only come if one had a weak golden core.

Or perhaps it was a mental battle. Only those whose suffering matched that of the resentful spirits they channeled could hope to control them. Wen Ruohan only knew power and luxury.

Either way, this suggested Jin Guangyao would be good at it, if he could risk delving into the art without either of his sworn brothers noticing. He grimaced as he walked down the hall. His golden core was one of his proudest accomplishments. He hadn't been raised in a Sect. All he had to go off of were the texts his mother bargained for with her body.

Yesterday, he would have considered giving it up for his father.

Now, he was glad his father was too distracted with the possibility of a golden core transfer. If he asked him to damage his core...there wasn't much stopping Jin Guangyao from killing him right where he sat, consequences to himself be damned.

He closed the door behind him and dismissed the healer with a wave of his hand.

"What are you doing?" Hanguang-Jun demanded.

Jin Guangyao waited for the door to close behind the older man, before setting a privacy talisman. There were too many spies in Koi Tower, "He can't be trusted."

"What?" Jin Zixuan frowned, "He's our Sect's best healer."

"And he will report everything to our father," Jin Guangyao snapped, "Do you think it's a good idea for him to have a healer's analysis of a golden core transfer?"

His half-brother's expression shuttered, "No."

He didn't hesitate. It was good to see he was learning.

"Can we trust you?" Da-ge pressed.

Jin Guangyao closed his eyes and didn't answer. What could he possibly say that would be believable? That he had a sudden change of heart? That he felt guilty and wanted to repent? Maybe Er-ge would buy that, but Huaisang would never.

"What has our Sect done?" Jin Zixuan asked.

Jin Guangyao sighed, "Surely you can guess."

"Everything Wei Wuxian said..." His half-brother trailed off, "It's true, isn't it? Our Sect's killed children? Elders? Everyone with the family name Wen?"

He just nodded. All his reasons...they would never be enough for him to go unpunished.

Hanguang-Jun lunged across the room, "And you call Wei Ying the monster."

Jin Guangyao expected to be stabbed.

"Stop!" Er-ge shouted.

Bichen stopped, the point cutting a hole through the front of his robes but not quite piercing the skin. He looked down at the death Hanguang-Jun would have given him. Not a clean one through the heart or neck. A severe abdominal wound. Fatal without immediate help. Even if he was shown some mercy...it would be debilitating. And painful.

"If you kill him," Jiang Yanli said, "Jin Guangshan will blame everything on him. We need his testimony."

"We have Inquiry," Hanguang-Jun replied.

"Who would believe it with your bias?" Huaisang asked from where he knelt over Jiang Wanyin, "San-ge's death would only make true justice harder."

The Second Jade of Lan's frown deepened, "Will you testify against Jin Guangshan?"

"He used me," Jin Guangyao met his gaze.

"You let yourself be used," Hanguang-Jun must truly want to kill him.

"I wanted my father to love me," He admitted, hating the way his heart ached with that desire still, "I wanted to be his son, not just his bastard." He laughed bitterly and stepped into the blade. Hanguang-Jun pulled it back in time, "I've damned myself for the impossible. I know I will burn, but I'm not going to burn alone."

If they couldn't trust him, they could trust that.

Hanguang-Jun sheathed his blade and went back to Jiang Wanyin. To Wei Wuxian's core.

"We will remove our father," Jin Zixuan decided, "Together."

"Don't be too sure about that," Huaisang finally looked up from his work, "What were you hoping to accomplish, San-ge, by cursing Jin Zixun?"

"Jin Zixun's cursed?" Lady Luo asked.

"He is," Jin Guangyao admitted, "Su She cursed him."

Nobody asked why. Then again, it was Jin Zixun.

"The Hundred Holes Curse," He continued apathetically. It seemed Huaisang figured everything out. The only way to survive was to play his game.

“Tell him to lift it,” Jin Zixuan ordered, “Zixun...I assume he was an enthusiastic accomplice?”

Jin Guangyao nodded.

His half-brother’s fists clenched, “I’ll overlook cursing him if you help me clean house.”

“Ah, Jin Zixuan,” Huaisang grimaced, “Don’t you see the bigger picture?”

Jin Guangyao closed his eyes. If he himself had cursed Jin Zixun, it could have been passed as petty revenge. With Su She’s help, it was more like a plot. Why would he stop at Jin Zixun? If he wanted to be at the top of the world, he needed to remove more than Jin Zixun.

By mentioning Su She, he gave the last piece to Huaisang. The piece he needed to put everything together.

Maybe Er-ge wouldn’t be enough to stop him from being killed.

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Jin Zixuan needed Guangyao. His father was an unrepentant monster. So was his cousin. It should bother him more that Guangyao was just going to let Zixun die from a curse...but honestly, Zixun wouldn’t do anything if the situations were reversed. He would probably just kill Guangyao to put him out of his misery and call it a favor.

There was no love lost there.

So it didn’t change much. Guangyao was a snake, just like the rest of his family, but what he wanted was acceptance and respect. Jin Zixuan already respected him, and with A-Li’s help it wouldn’t be hard to have him accepted. He was sure he could earn Guangyao’s loyalty, and then Guangyao could keep him alive while he went snake hunting.

Without him...who could he rely on? Nie Huaisang? How could he be certain Nie Huaisang would act in the Jin Sect’s best interest and not use it to the Nie Sect’s advantage?

No, he wanted to keep it within the Jin Sect.

“What’s the bigger picture?” He growled.

If Nie Huaisang knew so much, why not state it plainly?

“Jin Zixun believed Wei-xiong cursed him,” Nie Huaisang said, “He’s too much of a coward to face him in the Burial Mounds, but what if Wei-xiong left Yiling for say...the hundred day celebration of his nephew?” A-Li gasped, “Wei-xiong wouldn’t miss it for the world, and there are plenty of places Jin Zixun could set up an ambush to save his own life.”

“Even with an ambush, Jin Zixun couldn’t kill Wei Wuxian,” Chifeng-Zun frowned, “It wouldn’t get Jin Guangshan the Amulet.”

“Ah, but what if San-ge warned Jin Zixuan about it? Surely you’ve noticed how fidgety Jin Zixuan is. It would only get worse with time,” Nie Huaisang bit his lip, “Jin Zixuan, if you heard your cousin was ambushing Wei-xiong, you’d interfere, wouldn’t you? And wouldn’t it be awfully convenient for San-ge if Wei-xiong lost control and killed you both?”

“Guangyao couldn’t force him to lose control,” Jin Zixuan cut in, but hesitated and turned to his half-brother, “Could you?”

Guangyao’s expression was answer enough.

“He saved Er-ge when he was carrying the Lan Sect’s sacred texts,” Nie Huaisang answered nonetheless, “I’m sure there was something in there that could be used against Wei-xiong or Wen Ning. Otherwise, I don’t see why you would form an alliance with Su Minshan, San-ge. Not when you have such a close relationship with Er-ge.”

Jin Zixuan blinked. The Lan Sect’s disgust at the Su Sect’s existence was no secret. Why would Guangyao help Su Minshan if his sworn brother would rather see him struggle and fail?

Unless there was something only Su Minshan could offer. Like Lan Sect training in musical cultivation that would look suspicious if he asked Zewu-Jun for.

Combined with the secret techniques he’d never admitted to knowing, but in hindsight seemed obvious...

“With Wei-xiong framed for the death of a Sect Heir, the son of the Chief Cultivator...what could we do but go to war and kill him?” Nie Huaisang finished, “If it were subtle enough, would Wei-xiong put up much of a fight if he thought he killed his sister’s husband?” A-Li flinched, “If the Jin Sect got to him first...Wei-xiong would be dead. The Stygian Tiger Amulet in their hands.”

“And Jin Guangyao would be the new Jin Sect Heir,” Chifeng-Zun added.

Jin Zixuan struggled to breathe, too overwhelmed by the horror of what easily could have been. A part of his mind whispered that he shouldn’t be surprised. He ignored Guangyao. He passively allowed his mistreatment. Why would Guangyao spare him? His mother warned to watch out for the viciousness of bastards...

Who made him vicious? The scum he and his mother were abandoned to? Their own Sect when they kicked him down the steps of Koi Tower? The Nie Sect who continued to disrespect him? And then their own Sect again, where things only got worse for him with his father’s desires...

A part of him was horrified. Another part of him thought it was to be expected.

“I thought you were trying to convince us to spare his life,” Hanguang-Jun said.

“Hm?” Nie Huaisang hummed, tilting his head, “We are going to spare his life. I just thought Jin Zixuan should know who it is he plans to work with now.”

Now.

It had only been a day, but so much had changed. He knew so much more about Guangyao.

But was it enough?

Obviously, with his plan out in the open he couldn't go through with it. He also remembered his earlier words. When Jiang Wanyin gave up his life for Wei Wuxian, his half-brother thought it was idiotic because Wei Wuxian would never have been accepted as a Sect Leader. No, not Wei Wuxian. A bastard would never be accepted as a Sect Leader.

Guangyao gave up because he realized his goals were impossible. Not because they were wrong.

But when people were at their lowest, they were the most susceptible to change.

"Whether he lives or dies is not the decision of other Sects," Jin Zixuan managed to say without wavering, "Leave him to the Jin Sect."

"What do you plan to do with him?" Zewu-Jun asked.

Who did they think he was? He couldn't just make a decision now.

"I think," A-Li squeezed his hand, supporting them even though it was her brother against his, "That A-Xian and Wen Qing should be part of any decision regarding punishment."

Right. Good. Buy for time. Guangyao planned to kill him, but it was a complex plan. What if he prevented the ambush? What if Wei Wuxian, for once in his life, listened to him, and there was no fight to make him even appear to lose control? What if he survived? Would he go back to plotting? Try again and again until he got what he wanted or was discovered?

But things were different. They all knew too much about each other.

"Wei Ying is too forgiving," Hanguang-Jun argued, "Wen Qing doesn't kill."

Would that extend to sentencing?

"It is no less their decision," Zewu-Jun tempered.

"Four months," Nie Huaisang spoke up again, "Give me and San-ge time to gather evidence against Jin Guangshan--"

"What evidence is left?" Chifeng-Zun interrupted, "I'm sure the Jins were thorough."

The smaller man shook his head, "You really think anyone outside this room actually cares about justice for the Wens? Too many will fear being labeled co-conspirators and sharing in Jin Guangshan's downfall. They would rather injustice go unpunished than share in any punishment."

“No, this trial wouldn’t be about that,” Nie Huaisang grimaced, “There are some crimes even the most willfully blind can’t ignore and I’m certain Jin Guangshan has committed them.”

Jin Zixuan knew what he meant. He knew what he himself deliberately avoided thinking about. Still his stupid mouth opened, “You don’t think...”

“Don’t you?” Nie Huaisang asked in that knowing tone of a man who already knew the answer to his question.

“I’ll do whatever I can,” MianMian promised, “But...it will be hard to find anyone to speak up.”

Nie Huaisang nodded, “Four months might be an optimistic estimate.”

He glanced at Guangyao, who grimaced, “I know a lot, but not everything.”

“I’m sure Jin Zixun knows more about this,” MianMian muttered.

“Should I...?” Jin Zixuan trailed off, unsure what he could even do. He didn’t know anything. His mother would refuse to work with Guangyao. She might even refuse to do anything that would embarrass the Jin Sect. After all, she probably knew just how many women his father abused. There was a reason he was the only child she ever had.

And yet, she did nothing to take him down, even when Jin Zixuan was old enough to be the Sect Leader.

“He’s your father,” Nie Huaisang said slowly.

“He’s also Guangyao’s,” He argued.

Guangyao scoffed, “Don’t act like it’s remotely the same.” He finally met his gaze, “You’ve kept your hands clean your whole life. There’s no need to get in the mess now.”

“I’m helping,” Jin Zixuan declared, “I’m tired of doing nothing.”

For a moment, he thought his half-brother would try to convince him otherwise. When everything came to light, there would be backlash. Some would support them taking down a monster. Others would whisper about filial piety and how dare they turn against their father. If one could turn on their own blood, how were they trustworthy?

But wouldn’t it be worse to look blind and incompetent?

“Don’t mess it up,” Guangyao relented.

Jin Zixuan had time to decide what to do with his brother. Working together would give them both time to get to know each other better. Guangyao would have killed him if not for this viewing, but it made sense, in a way. His brother had no reason to think he was any different from his mother. Not until he got to know him a little through this viewing too.

“Nie Huaisang,” He turned to the smaller man, “How’s Jiang Wanyin?”



Guangyao was his brother. His burden. If they were to discuss something, it should be the man who was unconscious.

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Nie Mingjue only kept calm because he trusted Huaisang.

His younger brother was making it extremely difficult to do so, but Huaisang knew what he was doing. If he said Jin Guangyao needed to live, he would keep Baxia sheathed. Even as he outlined exactly how the liar would have risen to Chief Cultivator...he forced himself to breathe. Huaisang was taking the lead here. He wouldn't do anything unless he was asked.

Acting rashly...it would only make Huaisang keep more secrets. It would only prove he wasn't trustworthy enough to be involved in his schemes.

"He's...stabilizing," Huaisang answered slowly, "I hoped this would work, but it hasn't really been tested yet."

"It's Wei Ying's work," Wangji observed, even as he set out his guqin to begin playing.

"It is," His little brother managed a wry smile, "What? You thought I wasn't getting anything out of this?"

"Huaisang," Nie Mingjue warned.

"I want to see justice served," Huaisang met his gaze, "But I wasn't going to pass up an opportunity to have Wei-xiong and Wen Qing owe me a favor."

"But your Sect's qi deviations..." Xichen trailed off.

His best friend was trying hard to stay strong. Huaisang presented the plan as a betrayal to Jin Zixuan and Wangji, but really, the person hit hardest was Xichen. Xichen, who tried so hard to see the best in him. Who didn't see the worst coming. Xichen, who even now was struggling with feelings he would normally share with the man who didn't deserve it.

"I thought they were genetic," Xichen continued, "Even if there was something we could do, why ask a demonic cultivator?"

Huaisang stared at him.

Xichen couldn't handle another betrayal.

Xichen also couldn't handle the uncertainty.

Nie Mingjue wasn't a good liar and Huaisang was obviously not going to help him.

Huaisang went to Wei Wuxian because he was a genius. But Wangji and Xichen were also geniuses, so the only reason Huaisang would turn to his friend was the demonic element. Xichen liked to think the best of everyone, but he wasn't blind to evidence set before him.

“Da-ge,” Xichen pleaded, “Why would Wei Wuxian be able to help?”

If Huaisang just said Wen Qing, it would be another matter entirely. Qi deviations were in the medical domain, her domain.

“Xichen,” He exhaled, all his previous anger giving way to exhaustion, “I will tell you. In private.”

His best friend flinched.

“Where did you send Nie Zhonghui?” He asked his brother.

“To get Wen Qing,” Huaisang answered.

“Good,” He turned towards the door, feeling Xichen fall in step next to him.

There was no point discussing Wei Wuxian’s sacrifice. Not without Jiang Wanyin. He knew how this would look to Huaisang too. He wasn’t willing to give up his cultivation for his brother. If there was anyone who could get him to give up his saber, it was Xichen.

Maybe that was also why Baxia stayed sheathed while they talked about Jin Guangyao.

As much as he distrusted the man, he was almost relieved when Xichen grew close to him. Meng Yao was an alright man when he was just trying to be Meng Yao, not striving to be whoever Jin Guangyao was supposed to be. Around Xichen, he thought his youngest sworn brother was a little more real, a little more genuine.

He still did terrible things, but his efforts towards the Lan Sect’s rebuilding, towards Xichen, were real.

Nie Mingjue never told Xichen what he witnessed when the Wen first attacked. He never told Xichen what happened at Nightless City before Wen Ruohan either. He never planned to until this viewing of memories started, because as much as he disliked Jin Guangyao, he knew he needed him to be there for Xichen after he died.

It was too complicated for him to ever explain. Jin Guangyao was capable of terrible deeds. If he hadn’t realized Jin Guangshan was only using him, he would have helped provoke a war against Wei Wuxian.

But backed into a corner, anyone could become a monster.

“Jin Guangyao,” He said before he opened the door, “Where else can we speak in private?”

Jin Guangyao took that as an invitation to join them, “Are you sure?”

“You’d just figure it out anyway,” He lied.

They both betrayed Xichen. They both kept secrets that they knew would hurt him. They both decided to suffer in silence rather than trust him. No, they both chose to suffer alone

rather than share their burdens. He didn't want Xichen messing with resentful energy, and Jin Guangyao didn't want Xichen trying to outmaneuver Jin Guangshan politically.

It was to protect him and themselves.

Wangji was devastated by what happened to the love of his life. He was in no state to comfort his brother.

Jin Guangyao...half of what he was accused of hadn't happened yet. He obviously wouldn't further his father's ambitions. It wasn't a guarantee he wouldn't kill again, but his crimes so far were mostly what he did on his father's orders. He lied and murdered with the belief he would get Jin Guangshan's acceptance. He was as misled by Jin Guangshan as they'd been by him.

Nie Mingjue was relieved he was Jin Zixuan's problem. He wasn't sure what justice was anymore.

"What aren't you telling me?" Xichen demanded as soon as they couldn't be overheard.

Nie Mingjue took a deep breath, looking between his two sworn brothers.

He almost laughed. For all his hatred of deception, was he not the greatest deceiver? For all his contempt for hypocrisy, was he not the greatest hypocrite? All this time, he told himself there was a difference between his Sect's cultivation and what Wei Wuxian was doing. He made a distinction between using animal's resentment and human resentment.

He could no longer claim any moral high ground. He chose to use resentment. Wei Wuxian didn't have that choice.

How arrogant was he to think could judge anyone? How many bodies would he collect in his lifetime only to have them suffer?

Was that not the main reason they condemned demonic cultivation? Disrespect for the dead?

Their job as cultivators was to liberate, suppress, or eliminate resentment, to put the dead to rest. Not trap them in a never ending cycle of violence.

As he explained, he saw the shock spread through Xichen. He left no detail out. For the first time, it didn't strike him as a noble sacrifice. It was him continuing tradition. It was him perpetuating the way things were instead of changing them, improving them. The explanation sounded horrifying. For the first time in his life, he realized it was horrifying.

Xichen was a pillar of righteousness. He could be naive at times, but he knew right from wrong, good from evil.

"How..." Xichen tried so hard to stay strong, "How long do you have left?"

"Years if I'm lucky," Nie Mingjue answered, "The war didn't help."

Xichen stepped forward, grabbing his wrist to check his core, “And you can’t just stop? Find another way to cultivate?”

He sighed, a thousand justifications on his tongue, but only one came out, “This is the fate of a Nie.”

Xichen laughed. It was a bitter, broken noise. It was unlike any laugh he’d ever heard from the man. The laugh quickly gave way to tears. If it were yesterday, Nie Mingjue could say he had never seen Xichen cry like this. Now, he had an image in his mind. He cried like this when he thought he was leaving his uncle to die by Wen hands.

He cried this way when he felt useless.

“I’m so tired of hearing that word,” Xichen let go, “You’re fated to die. Wei Wuxian is fated to fall and Wangji for heartbreak. A-Yao is fated to be a monster...do none of us have power over our own destinies?” He hastily wiped away his tears, “Or is it that there’s nothing worth fighting it for? Da-ge, not even for Huaisang? A-Yao...not even for me?”

“Er-ge,” Jin Guangyao grabbed his sleeve, “I never wanted to hurt you.”

“Let go!” Xichen snapped, stepping away from both of them. He straightened his robes, attempting to gain some control over himself, “I need...I need to be alone now.”

“Xichen,” Nie Mingjue tried to continue.

His best friend held up a hand, “Don’t say it. You were both planning to leave me alone, weren’t you? Da-ge, you were going to die, and A-Yao...you must realize that karma would have caught up with you eventually. Even if you achieved a high place, it wouldn’t last. No matter who you killed.”

Jin Guangyao looked pained as he muttered, “I realize that now.”

Now was too late.

Xichen shook his head and left without another word.

“I almost wish Hanguang-Jun killed me,” His youngest sworn brother closed his eyes.

Nie Mingjue looked at him, “You don’t have anything to say to me?”

“Would my words make a difference?” Jin Guangyao turned away, “I helped systematically kill off innocents. I would have finished the job too, as long as I could have a place here. As long as I could be your equal...” He reached up and took off his hat, “I hoped to destroy Meng Yao and become Jin Guangyao, buy my way in blood...”

Was he trying to explain himself?

Nie Mingjue clenched his hands into fists, “The Wen Sect would have been killed even if you hadn’t helped.”

“Is that an acceptable excuse?” Jin Guangyao sounded curious.

“No, but who am I to judge you?” His youngest sworn brother turned to look at him sharply, “I knew the Jin were up to no good. I knew not to listen to you. I just didn’t care. It didn’t matter to me what fate the rest of the Wen dogs met. They were guilty, either by their actions or their inaction. They didn’t stand up to the evil in their midst...and neither did I.”

“So where does that leave us?” His former Vice-General wondered.

“Where does that leave us?” Nie Mingjue echoed, “Have you given up your ambitions?”

Jin Guangyao laughed, “I don’t know. Everything I want is impossible for me to have.”

All Nie Mingjue had ever wanted was for him to give them up. He hadn’t realized how much giving up would break him. He wondered how he would feel, to find out everything he’d done was for nothing.

Then again, it wasn’t that different for him. He’d spent so long trying to take down Wen Ruohan and the Wen Sect, only for them to be replaced by Jin Guangshan and the Jin Sect. There would never be an end to evil.

They all needed to be better, and Jin Guangyao couldn’t improve if he just gave up.

Neither could he if he just resigned himself to his fate.

“Not everything,” Nie Mingjue admitted, “Xichen still cares for you.”

“Not anymore,” Jin Guangyao shook his head, “Why would he?”

Suddenly, Nie Mingjue remembered that Jin Guangyao still didn’t know the story of Xichen’s parents.

“That isn’t for me to say,” He grabbed his shoulder, “Go talk to him.”

“He wants to be alone,” His youngest sworn brother frowned at him.

“He never wants to be alone,” Nie Mingjue frowned back, “I knew I wouldn’t always be there for him, but I hoped you would be.”

There was a proper way in this world. A son obeyed his father. They all followed the path set before them by their ancestors.

Look where that led them.

He wandered back to the room with Huaisang. No one asked how their discussion went or why he returned alone. No one offered something else to talk about. They simply listened to Wangji play his music.

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Jiang Yanli wasn't sure how long they sat in silence.

Time seemed irrelevant. There was so much to process, and she'd rather do that awake than suffer whatever nightmares awaited her in her sleep.

So much made sense.

A-Xian didn't leave because he wanted to. He left because he felt he needed to. He couldn't stay in a cultivation Sect without the ability to cultivate. The longer he stayed, the higher the chances were that someone would discover his secret. Discovery would risk A-Cheng, and through him the entire Jiang Sect.

He was always going to leave.

Which meant it wasn't anything they did to drive him away. Of course they couldn't support him the way he needed. She never would have guessed he had no golden core.

She didn't think about what they were going to do about Lianfeng-Zun. In a distant way, she knew she should be angry, but there didn't seem to be a point. What would hurting him get them? It wasn't his idea to kill the Wen. He didn't lust after the Stygian Tiger Amulet. None of this was personal for him, except, maybe, how it hurt Zewu-Jun.

Could she condemn a man for not caring when he was never shown how to care?

The rest of them were all just stepping stones to get what he wanted, to get what Jin Guangshan wanted. Of course the son of a prostitute would see everyone as a tool, as a means towards an end.

Well, they used to be just that. If there was one thing this experience proved, it was how human they all were. Humans naturally made mistakes.

But what would count as reparations here? Unseating Jin Guangshan? What about after? No one could raise the dead, and it would take a minor miracle for any of the Sects to return Wen land back to them. Maybe they could give them Dafan Mountain back, but A-Xuan would have enough trouble just keeping control of the Jin Sect.

What would reparations to A-Xian even look like? His reputation would always be in tatters so long as he depended on demonic cultivation. If there were a way to give him another core...

"You should rest," Her husband broke the silence.

"Not until I know A-Cheng is alright," She replied.

A sleepless night was nothing. She'd had plenty of sleepless nights during her pregnancy, worried about the world she was bringing an innocent child into.

"Nie Zhonghui is fast," Chifeng-Zun said, "He should return before dawn."

"The Burial Mounds aren't that far," A-Xuan frowned.

“Wen Qing may not be able to ride her own sword,” Nie Huaisang reminded them, “That’s if Wei-xiong will let her come here alone.”

Her heart ached for the chance to see her wayward brother, but it wasn’t safe for him. Not when the world was still deciding whether he was still a threat or now a target. Wen Qing was valuable now because they saw her as innocent and she also proved her skills were beyond imagination. She also meant something to A-Cheng.

“What are we going to do when she gets here?” Hanguang-Jun asked, “If Jiang Wanyin continues to reject his...Wei Ying’s core...”

“It’s Jiang-xiong’s core now,” Nie Huaisang muttered, “I doubt this is reversible.”

“He just has to accept it,” Jiang Yanli murmured.

It was easy to say. It was much harder to do.

“How do you accept that?” A-Xuan asked.

“Same way you accept any sacrifice, I suppose,” Nie Huaisang absentmindedly traced the talisman’s design, “You have to accept that some people value you more than anything else in their life.”

Chifeng-Zun flinched, “Huaisang-”

“Don’t, Da-ge,” Nie Huaisang interrupted, a note of desperation in his voice, “Unless you’ve changed your mind, I don’t want to hear it.” He kept his focus on A-Cheng, laughing bitterly, “I’m almost jealous. I hate that Wei-xiong is the one to suffer, but could you imagine loving someone so much you’d tear out a piece of your soul?”

Jiang Yanli could. She just wished her core were stronger. Maybe then she could give it to A-Xian.

“You believe Wei Ying did this out of love and not duty?” Hanguang-Jun asked.

“Do we not have a duty to those we love?” Nie Huaisang countered, “Some people value family over their Sect, but it all just becomes complicated when your Sect is your family. Maybe he did this because Jiang-xiong is the Sect Leader. Maybe he did this because he’s his brother. Jiang Cheng is Jiang Cheng either way.”

Hanguang-Jun played the wrong note. It was obvious, as was his deep breath to recenter himself, “Politics.”

“Wei-xiong is safer as part of the Jiang Sect than on his own,” Nie Huaisang added a new talisman, “This should be enough for Jiang-xiong to reinstate him, even in his absence.”

“People will not fear Sandu Shengshou as they used to,” Chifeng-Zun reminded him.

He was right. Now that everyone knew his core wasn’t his originally, now that they’d seen him collapse publicly...they would still respect him as his position demanded, but they

wouldn't fear him.

"We just need time," Nie Huaisang muttered, "If we reveal Jin Guangshan as a bigger monster..."

"It wouldn't absolve A-Xian," Jiang Yanli shook her head, "At least now we know why he uses demonic cultivation."

Knowing why wasn't enough for everyone. It would stop most people for a while, but eventually their desire for power, for the Stygian Tiger Amulet, would overpower any shame at targeting a man who had sacrificed everything for his family.

It was better than the entire cultivation world going against him in a provoked war.

Still, there was a difference between actively hurting A-Xian and passively allowing him to come to harm.

A-Xian was vulnerable now. Jin Guangshan thought they needed an army to overpower the Yiling Patriarch. He bid his time so he could create that army.

Other power hungry fools would begin to see a broken man without a golden core. If they started working on purging him of resentment in hopes of giving him an average life...wouldn't he just become an easier target to others?

That was without considering the issue of the Stygian Tiger Amulet and if A-Xian would let them protect him.

Still, a target was slightly better than a threat. They could shield a target.

"Do you think there's a way for him to get a golden core?" Her husband wondered, "Wen Zhuliu's other victims...their cores were melted and their meridians damaged. Wei Wuxian doesn't have the same damage."

"We'll find a solution," Hanguang-Jun said.

"Nothing's that easy," Nie Huaisang bit his lip, "I'd rather prepare for the worst."

Jiang Yanli froze, "You don't think this will save his life?"

"I don't know anymore," Nie Huaisang admitted, "I thought Wei-xiong was desperate, not broken. Changing the circumstances can help desperation, but moving a broken thing to a new place doesn't fix it."

"He was willing to die to hide his secret," Lady Luo said, "Now that everyone knows..."

"It doesn't change that," Jiang Yanli finished.

A-Xian knew he was shortening his life when he gave up his core. He knew he would leave. Maybe he hoped someone would go after him and kill him. Maybe he felt he deserved it.



They settled back into another silence. Jiang Yanli wished there was a way that A-Xian could just disappear until the cultivation world calmed down. They couldn't keep him hidden in a Sect, as hidden gave the impression of wrongdoing. Yet as long as he was part of a Sect he was at the mercy of Sect politics.

Once again her mind drifted to Song Lan and Xiao Xingchen, to the life A-Xian and Hanguang-Jun envied. No Sect politics. No demands. Just a simple life on the road, helping those who needed it in the company of the one they loved most.

Could A-Xian just disappear? She'd miss him terribly, but keeping him close meant keeping him in reach of others. He'd have as much time as he could give himself. If Hanguang-Jun was with him there was little doubt the two could survive anything. They could be together and simply be until the cultivation world was safe enough for A-Xian.

It was something to keep in mind.

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Lan Xichen was tempted to get drunk.

He was always so carefree when drunk. It was like the world slipped away. There was no past, no future. Only the haze of existence.

Getting drunk wouldn't solve anything, and getting drunk alone would just be depressing.

He tried to meditate, to calm his inner turmoil, but it got him nowhere. He tried to play restful music, but his hands were too tense to move correctly, and he feared his rising frustration would lead him to damage his instrument.

So he sat there. Doing nothing.

Like always.

What a fool he was!

He thought he was so compassionate, so understanding, and it turned out that he understood nothing! No one! Both of his sworn brothers were keeping life-altering secrets from him. If it weren't for this viewing he'd never have suspected either! He'd just have been their happy fool as they went and got themselves killed following their father's orders.

Da-ge collected bodies so his saber would have something to fight once he was no longer there to control it.

A-Yao systematically eradicated an entire Sect. He planned to frame and murder an innocent man.

He didn't want to get started on Wei Wuxian and how wrong he'd been there. He obviously misunderstood Wangji if he was so wrong about the love of his life. He didn't know how many apologies were owed for believing his deceiving sworn brother over him.

Was he even good enough to be Sect Leader?

Should he just turn everything over to Wangji and go into seclusion? Wangji would do well. He'd bring more good than Lan Xichen ever managed. He wouldn't be fooled. His compassion didn't blind him.

"Er-ge?" A-Yao's voice came from behind him.

He'd let himself into his room.

"A-Yao," He didn't rise to greet him properly.

The smaller man came closer hesitantly, "Da-ge suggested you wouldn't want to be alone."

"And he thought your company was preferable to his own?" Lan Xichen narrowed his eyes.

It seemed like such a silly thing to lie about, but he couldn't be sure anymore.

He also wasn't sure which sworn brother he'd rather see.

"I think he wants to stay closer to Huaisang," A-Yao kept the table between them, "I don't know what he can do there. If I were Huaisang..."

Lan Xichen should go check on Huaisang. Yes, it was another person who he had been too blind to see properly, but it was also someone who understood the betrayal that stung his own heart. How hard was it to watch another brother give up his cultivation when his own wouldn't do the same?

"Perhaps I should join the others," A-Yao continued, "I understand if you never want to speak to me again. Someone like me--"

"Do you really believe only flawless people can be loved?" Lan Xichen interrupted.

He'd almost forgotten he wanted to have this conversation. But the reason he felt so betrayed, so confused, was because he loved his sworn brothers. Da-ge knew everything about him, and he'd thought that went both ways. A-Yao didn't know everything yet.

Not that it mattered. He'd love them anyway.

"What I've done--"

"What you've done is irrelevant," He interrupted again, "Love isn't forgiveness. I can still love you and disapprove of what you've done. I will still love you if--"

Lan Xichen paused. This viewing had impacted all of them more than he thought possible. It was because they could see what happened. There was proof that went beyond words. Wei Wuxian's life affected A-Yao because it was an example, not a hypothetical. He could draw parallels and see the outcome as it applied to himself.

There was no point in wills with A-Yao. Promises could be empty.

He forced himself to maintain eye contact, "I've never told you about my parents."

"You haven't," A-Yao agreed.

"Have you ever wondered why?" Lan Xichen asked.

"I have," His sworn brother's eyebrows creased, "It's...suspicious, how little there is to be known."

"My Sect's elders prefer it that way. They'd rather suspicion to the truth," Lan Xichen forced himself not to think how that applied to the three of them, "My father fell in love with my mother at first sight. My mother...."

"Didn't feel the same?" A-Yao prodded.

"I don't know," He would never know. It wasn't something he'd thought to ask as a child, "It didn't matter. She killed my father's teacher. Rather than see her executed for it, my father married her and hid her in Gusu. He then secluded himself. Wangji and I were raised by Uncle, only allowed to see our mother once a month until her death. I only met my father a handful of times..."

"Er-ge..." The smaller man didn't know what to say.

But how was one supposed to respond to that?

"That's why Uncle hates Wei Wuxian so much," He continued, tying the past to the present, "He fears Wangji will lose himself to love, ruin his life for a criminal." He closed the gap between them, taking A-Yao's hands into his, "He'll fear the same for me when the truth comes out." He held them tightly, "Do you understand?"

Lan Xichen's breathing was the only noise in the room, as A-Yao held his breath. There was a long pause, before A-Yao nodded, "Did you ever find out why she killed him?"

"No," He confessed, "I don't think anyone cared to ask her why."

"I'm sure it was a good reason," A-Yao managed a smile, "She brought you into the world, I doubt she was evil."

"Do you think you are evil?" Lan Xichen asked.

"Don't you?" His sworn brother replied.

"Evil is a label. People make choices based on their desires," He tried to figure out what was going through his mind, "I don't think you desired evil. Revenge, power, recognition...chaos maybe, because chaos is opportunity. You chose evil methods because the righteous ones wouldn't have gotten you what you desired as quickly."

Or at all. He couldn't seek justice for his mistreatment at those who saw him as only a bastard and the son of a prostitute. He wasn't the type to forgive and forget, which only left revenge.

“Do you still have those same desires?” Lan Xichen asked, “Will you keep making the wrong choices? Will you continue to pursue your desires at whatever cost?”

“If I did...” A-Yao trailed off, “What would happen to you?”

“I’d continue to care for you,” He promised, “And I’d hate myself for it with every crime you commit.”

A-Yao drew his hands back, “Don’t.”

“Then don’t commit any more crimes.”

Maybe it was manipulative. A-Yao should choose to do the right thing because it was the right thing.

But Lan Xichen wasn’t willing to take that risk. Not anymore. He couldn’t let anyone else die because of his inaction.

If the suggestion that they would share the same fate forced him to be better, he would make it so.

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Nie Huaisang’s head hurt.

It was nothing to the spreading bitterness in his heart.

Of course his brother didn’t care about him. It didn’t matter how pathetic he made himself appear. Da-ge was willing to leave the Nie Sect to him when all he saw him as was a weak, stupid, frivolous young man. This viewing may have changed how they saw each other, but it didn’t sway him from his convictions.

Revealing how dangerous San-ge was, and how Er-ge needed him didn’t work either.

So he focused on Jiang Cheng and tried to stamp down his jealousy.

MianMian touched his arm, “What’s wrong?”

“So many things,” He muttered, “But I’m alright.”

“I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s wrong,” She frowned, “Are you fighting with Chifeng-Zun?”

“What’s the point?” Nie Huaisang sighed, “Whether I’m a genius or an idiot, he doesn’t listen to me.”

“So you just give up?” She challenged.

“Regroup,” He corrected, because he’d never give up.

He was just discouraged.

“Regroup with Zewu-Jun and Lianfeng-Zun?” She checked.

Nie Huaisang nearly forgot. They wouldn’t want Da-ge dead either.

But he’d had enough scheming for the night. So he whined, “It’s not a conspiracy yet.” And did his best to look pathetic.

MianMian smiled and patted his head.

Despite himself, he did feel better.

“It’s getting close to dawn,” Jin Zixuan commented, staring out the window at the disappearing stars, “Should one of us wait for your man outside?”

Da-ge left.

Like he always would.

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Madam Jin examined the sores on her nephew’s chest.

It had to be the work of that bastard. He’d already proved he was more vicious than his meek act suggested. He was a murderer. Why wouldn’t he kill again?

This would be enough to kick him out of the Jin Sect. Her husband would have no other choice. It was obvious that the bastard wouldn’t be satisfied with just Zixun’s life. How long before he targeted A-Xuan? It was obvious he would do anything to rise. How long before he turned on Guangshan?

Maybe she could even get away with permanently removing him.

“You won’t die tonight,” She pronounced, turning away so he could close his robes.

“And you’re certain it’s Jin Guangyao?” Zixun asked.

“Who else could it be?”

Zixun’s face filled with rage, “Let’s get him out of bed. He will remove it now.”

“It can wait until the morning,” Madam Jin smiled.

She would have something proper ready in the morning.

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Jiang Cheng woke up.

He blinked blearily to awareness, feeling strangely calm, “Wen-guniang?”

Wen Qing was kneeling next to him, holding his hand in hers.

No, not his hand. She was holding his wrist. The calm he was feeling was her spiritual energy.

“Jiang-zongzhu,” Wen Qing replied, but didn’t stop.

His memories came rushing back to him. Wei Wuxian gave him his core!

“If you Qi deviate, it will all have been for nothing,” She said sharply, “Don’t disrespect his choice like that.”

Jiang Cheng snorted, but listened, “Could you respect it?”

It was a stupid question. If she didn’t respect his choice, she wouldn’t have done the transfer.

“Could you give it back?” He followed up, still somewhat numb.

“No,” Wen Qing shook her head, “You already know what it’s like to be without a core. Some part of you will instinctively fight the transfer. It only worked with Wei Wuxian because he was completely willing.”

What a kind way to call him a selfish bastard. He fully relaxed. There truly was no point to getting worked up about it. If Wen Qing said it couldn’t be reversed, it couldn’t be reversed. He knew he would rather keep his brother’s core than go back to the misery of being without one. So he stared at the ceiling.

“He must have made you swear never to tell,” He said.

“We all make promises,” She replied, “Sometimes we are lucky enough to be able to keep them.”

“It doesn’t stop the guilt,” He muttered.

“It doesn’t,” She agreed.

He glanced at her. It had been over a year since he had seen her last. He could recall it too easily, how she had turned away after returning the comb. She’d rejected him because he couldn’t be what she needed. He couldn’t protect her people.

She was dressed in her Wen Sect robes, a defiant red that seemed brighter in the early morning sun. Still, while she was dressed immaculately, he could easily make out the thinness of her face, the tiredness that lingered around her eyes. Living in the Burial Mounds hadn’t made her any less beautiful, but it had worn at her.

“Did Wei Wuxian come with you?” He asked.

“No,” Wen Qing frowned, “It isn’t safe for him.”

“Is it safe for you?”

She met his gaze, and he felt small. She'd always made him feel small, as though she could see through every facade he put up to the struggling young man beneath, "You said you would help me again if I came to you."

"I can only protect you," Jiang Cheng looked away.

Her hand slipped down his wrist to grab his hand, "That's all I need right now."

Only because Wei Wuxian was there to protect her people.

Still, Jiang Cheng was here. With her. He pulled himself together. For her.

He swallowed and sat up slowly, aware of every touch as she helped him. She grabbed a tray from next to her with their breakfast. It was then that he realized they weren't alone in the room. A-Jie and the peacock were sitting at the small table, sharing a light breakfast with Nie Huaisang and Lan Wangji.

"I'm surprised you don't hate me," Wen Qing admitted as she passed him a bowl.

"I don't think I can," He admitted right back.

A ghost of a smile graced her face, "Do you still have that comb?"

He didn't carry it on his person at all times anymore. He didn't deserve to after failing her.

"It's in my room," He couldn't smile back at her, but he could focus on her. It was better than working himself up into another Qi deviation. He would never be worthy of the sacrifice Wei Wuxian made for him, but if anyone understood that, it was Wen Qing. He could tell from the stiffness of her movements that she struggled under the same burden.

"Jiang-xiong," Nie Huaisang interrupted, "You missed a lot last night."

Jiang Cheng frowned at them, noticing how tired his sister was, "Did any of you sleep?"

"Like we could," Jin Zixuan scoffed.

"We're ready for today," A-Jie said, "We can rest when A-Xian is declared innocent."

Jiang Cheng nodded. He could hate himself later, but Wei Wuxian needed to come first.

It was a new day and he felt like a new man.

Not a better man, but so much of his worldview had shifted. He wanted to be better.

"How much could I have missed?"

So I lied last chapter. I decided to procrastinate doing the transcription by writing an entire chapter without it. The next chapter will probably take a month.

Also procrastinated what to do about JGY. Final call on thoughts about what to do with the Burial Mounds. I'm not the biggest fan of writing gore, but I've never really tried either.

Edit July 5th, 2021: Thanks for over 2800 kudos! I've almost finished the next segment of transcription and should have the next chapter by the 17th at the latest.

Edit July 16th: My computer's charger isn't working. Chapter may be delayed if I can't finish the final it before it dies.



# Into Darkness Deep As Hell

## Chapter Summary

Why, you ask, was I bound and chained in this cold and dismal place?

Wen Chao, that's why.

## Chapter Notes

Chapter title is a Phantom of the Opera reference

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wen Qing sat perfectly still as Luo Qingyang and Jiang Yanli did her hair. She'd never been one for anything more than practicality. Even after Jiang Wanyin gave her the comb, she'd never had a reason to display it. Now she did.

Nie Zhonghui had no idea what emergency she was being summoned for. All he'd known was that Nie Huaisang requested her aid. The resulting argument between her and Wei Wuxian still echoed in her ears. It was foolish to go to Lanling. What if she was killed? What if they took her hostage to try to get to Wei Wuxian or A-Ning or her people?

It was dangerous, but Wei Wuxian didn't know what she had done. The request had to do with the golden core transfer. Nie Huaisang wouldn't ask for her if it was just to explain the procedure, so the only option was Jiang Wanyin taking the news poorly and rejecting the core.

He needed her. Not even Wei Wuxian could have stopped her from leaving.

"You could borrow some of my robes," Luo Qingyang offered, rubbing at a worn patch of her red robes.

"Wearing a different color doesn't change who I am," Wen Qing replied.

Jiang Yanli smiled, "Most of those present assume you won't be a Wen much longer."

Wen Qing fought not to react. She bit back the retort that Jiang Yanli didn't go by Madam Jin, just as Madam Yu hadn't been Madam Jiang.

Marriage wasn't something she'd ever considered for herself. She was Wen Ruohan's. He wanted her close for her expertise, and that meant rejecting most betrothals on her behalf.

Then she was undesirable to all.

Jiang Wanyin...

Maybe it was time to start considering. He was a good man. Lacking the means to protect her family was never his fault, but she could tell he blamed himself anyways. He blamed himself for many of the world's failures. He tried so hard to be Jiang-zongzhu, to do right by the people who put their trust in him, even if he had to destroy himself to do so.

She had nothing to complain about. He could be surly, and often said things he didn't mean, but she was the same. They both understood it was how they protected themselves. He valued his cultivation more than his own life, but she could say she would rather die than betray the oaths she took as a healer. They would work well together.

She'd heard enough about Lotus Pier from Wei Wuxian to imagine a peaceful life there.

Was it love?

Wen Qing shook her head, hiding the motion as testing the weight of the comb in the braid.

She couldn't get her hopes up. There was a reason marriage was impossible for her. She'd wear the comb. She'd sit by Jiang Wanyin's side. She would be careful not to eat too much and embarrass herself. She would present herself in the best light and argue why she deserved freedom.

Freedom was the goal here. Not love. Love could wait, just as it always had.

Jiang Wanyin cleared his throat, "It suits you, Wen-guniang."

She offered him the smallest of smiles, "Thank you, Jiang-zongzhu."

Luo Qingyang coughed, "You might want to speak to each other more...familiarly?"

Wen Qing nodded. From the brief summary she'd been given of events she hadn't been present for, Jiang Wanyin's regard for her was obvious. If she returned that was...less so.

"Wen Qing," Jiang Wanyin compromised.

"Wanyin," She returned.

This could work if they allowed it to. This could work if both of them felt like it was something they deserved. But she could read the weight of his failures in the disruption of his body's energy.

Neither of them were in the right place. Not yet. But it wasn't hard to put on an act.

"We should be going," Jin Zixuan worried, "We're already late."

"How can you be late to your own party?" Lady Luo wondered, "What are they going to do? Start without us?"

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Qin Su sat quietly behind her father, listening as the other newcomers were filled in on what they missed.

When she thought of it like that it almost sounded as though they missed the first act of a play, or the first few chapters of a reading. The people around her treated this like gossip, and not as though it were a man's life. They certainly weren't fully understanding how their own actions contributed to the tragedy, though she could sense their guilt at certain parts.

She tuned out some of the other young ladies who tittered about romance. Yes, it was unbelievably tragic for Sect Leader Jiang to be in love with a Wen. It was doubly tragic for Hanguang-Jun to yearn for the Yiling Patriarch. But they didn't whisper in sympathy.

They were hoping the two unattainable cultivators would do something shameful. They hoped to use that shame to their advantage and get a beneficial marriage.

It made Qin Su sick. She was always taught by her mother that position didn't matter. A servant could be the best of friends and confidants. A Sect Leader could be the worst scum alive. Respect owed was not always respect earned.

"Wei Wuxian didn't have a golden core," Her father said thoughtfully, "Demonic cultivation was the only path he had."

"He could have chosen not to cultivate at all," Sect Leader Yao insisted.

Sect Leader Ouyang nodded, "A mediocre life is better than an evil one."

"A cowardly life," Her father corrected, "Where he couldn't avenge his Sect, nor honorably assist the Sunshot Campaign and defeat Wen Ruohan."

It wasn't like many here had done as much as Wei Wuxian, even with their golden cores. That he achieved so much with so little was remarkable. She still wasn't sure what happened at Qiongqi Pass, but the Jin Sect had been wrong about where Wei Wuxian acquired his Yin Iron and his reasons for becoming a demonic cultivator.

They could be wrong a third time, which was the true reason her father came. Jin Guangshan was a friend of his. They were still allies. If Jin Guangshan was revealed to be a villainous tyrant...it wasn't something they wanted to hear about secondhand.

Qin Su hoped it was nothing more than a misunderstanding and everyone could get back to enjoying peace.

Before the discussion could continue, there was a commotion at the entrance.

"Madam Jin, please reconsider," Zewu-Jun's voice was raised as he kept pace with a furious Madam Jin, "Is this matter not best dealt with privately?"

"So you can cover it up?" Madam Jin snapped.

“To prevent embarrassment,” Zewu-Jun glanced around, “Haven’t we learned not to make hasty accusations?”

“Haven’t you learned that your sworn brother is a lying coward who will do anything to gain power?” Madam Jin replied.

Lianfeng-Zun was thrown to the floor in the middle of the room. Two Jin disciples kept him from rising higher than his knees. Jin Zixun had his sword half-drawn, his expression livid.

Opinion was split on Lianfeng-Zun. He assisted in Xue Yang’s escape to save the Nie Sect. He committed murder to cover that up rather than tell Chifeng-Zun the truth, leading to his expulsion. Undoubtedly, more would be revealed about his efforts during the Sunshot Campaign, but none of that mattered here.

This was just Madam Jin trying to punish a bastard for his existence. Qin Su’s heart ached for the young man.

“What is the meaning of this?” Chifeng-Zun demanded.

“This bastard has cursed Zixun!” Madam Jin announced, “He plots to usurp us all!”

Whispers broke out around the room. It was a story told too many times. Qin Su nearly rolled her eyes at the accusation.

“Madam Jin makes accusations with no evidence,” Zewu-Jun argued, “Only her own prejudices-”

“Prejudices?” Madam Jin interrupted, “Bastards are bastards. There is a reason they have no place amongst us.”

The reason being that Madam Jin viewed Lianfeng-Zun as a threat. While Qin Su thought highly of Jin Zixuan, there was a reason he lacked a title. His actions were well-intentioned, but not heroic. The only thing holding Lianfeng-Zun back from power was his birth. If they’d been born equals, there was little doubt in her mind who came out of the war more impressive.

“What curse?” Sect Leader Su demanded.

Zewu-Jun shot a displeased look in his direction, then revealed, “Hundred Holes.”

Jin Zixun sheathed his sword to reveal the marks on his chest.

Qin Su bit her lip as Sect Leader Ouyang frowned, “Then evidence is simple. If Lianfeng-Zun doesn’t have the rebound, he didn’t cast the curse.”

This was exactly what Madam Jin wanted.

“Strip him!”

It wasn't about finding out if Lianfeng-Zun was guilty. It was about publicly humiliating him.

Stripping him in public as though he were a mistress being punished by a Madam.

Qin Su averted her gaze at the sound of fabric tearing. It was the polite thing to do. Sadly, if she wanted to bear witness to his innocence, she also had to bear witness to his shame. So she looked up. His hat had been knocked aside. They hadn't stopped at just revealing his chest. The golden robes lay in tatters, some of the fabric bunched where his hands were fisted in the fabric.

There were old scars that spoke of an uneasy life, but none that indicated he was guilty of the crime committed.

"Are you satisfied?" Chifeng-Zun growled, "There is no mark on him."

Madam Jin didn't look at all disappointed in being wrong.

Jin Zixun sneered, "Perhaps Wen Ruohan taught him some tricks?"

Zewu-Jun removed his outermost robe and draped it over his sworn brother, "Or perhaps Jin Zixun has other enemies?"

Jin Zixun was a forceful man. It was an attribute many in this room admired as long as that force wasn't exerted on them. She always found him to be rude and arrogant.

"What is going on here?" Jin Zixuan demanded as he ran down the hall.

Nie Huaisang was faster, and he quickly knelt next to Lianfeng-Zun, "San-ge."

Lianfeng-Zun carefully answered, "Zixun thought I cursed him."

His voice was soft, shaken. How terrible must it be to be so humiliated in one's own home?

"Mother," Jin Zixuan removed his own outer robe, draping his half-brother in gold, "You have gone too far this time."

"I am only trying to protect our family," Madam Jin defended.

"Guangyao is part of our family," The new father said, "He is my brother and I want him to be treated as such. No one should suffer because of their parentage." His mother opened her mouth, but he just held up his hand, "Guangyao, go get dressed. We will wait for you before continuing."

Lianfeng-Zun nodded slowly, and gripped Nie Huaisang's arm tightly as he rose, "Thank you, Zixuan."

Zewu-Jun and Chifeng-Zun left with the two smaller men.

"Father," Qin Su leaned forward, "I am going to get some fresh air."

Her father grimaced, likely wanting to escape the rising tension in the room as well but needing to stay with his friends, "Prepare yourself."

Qin Su nodded, then hurried away. She tried not to make it obvious when she picked up Lianfeng-Zun's hat. Not that anyone was looking at her, what with Wen Qing entering arm in arm with Sect Leader Jiang. She used that distraction to duck out of the hall and wait.

It didn't take long for them to return. She greeted them nervously.

"Ah," Lianfeng-Zun noticed his hat, "Thank you, Qin-guniang."

She drew closer to give it back, "It was horrible, what Madam Jin did." She blushed, embarrassed by her own forwardness but unwilling to just ignore what happened, "I hope you know there are many people who admire you, Lianfeng-Zun."

"Are you one of those admirers?" Nie Huaisang teased.

"Huaisang," Chifeng-Zun scolded.

Qin Su ducked her head, then turned it into a bow, "I should return to my father."

"Aiyah. I'm sorry," Nie Huaisang quickly apologized, "I only meant that you are a good person, Qin-guniang, and good people shouldn't have to sit near Yao-zongzhu and Ouyang-zongzhu."

"Oh?" Qin Su straightened, "Where should they sit?"

"With other good people of course!" The flippant Young Master of Qinghe beamed, "Do you know Luo Qingyang?"

Qin Su nodded slowly. It had been some time since they'd spoken, but Luo Qingyang used to be the disciple in charge of leading around female guests in Lanling. She wouldn't say they were close, but they knew each other, "It would still be inappropriate, Nie-gongzi."

"Who cares what's considered appropriate?" Nie Huaisang waved his fan around, "What Madam Jin just did would be considered appropriate by many. Sometimes we have to decide for ourselves what we should do, right?" He took a step closer, "Besides, I'm sitting with Jiang-xiong today, and it'd be mean to leave MianMian with Da-ge. He's such poor company."

Qin Su couldn't hold back a giggle at Chifeng-Zun's next scolding, "Huaisang!"

"Won't you do me this favor, Qin-guniang?" Nie Huaisang asked, clasping his hands together.

It would be nice to get away from certain people.

"It would be my privilege, Nie-gongzi."

There were some whispers when she took the seat reserved for Nie Huaisang. She just smiled to placate her father, and then Sect Leader Yao was whispering to him. Probably that it was a good thing for her to be in such esteemed company. If she could marry any of the Venerated Triad, it would mean nothing but good fortune for her Sect.

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If the members of his family could stop scheming against each other for five minutes...

Jin Zixuan took his seat and resisted the urge to put his head in his hands. His father had ordered the mass slaughter of innocents. His brother and cousin helped him do it. Said brother also plotted the death of said cousin and himself. Then his mother had to go and strip him publicly just to...what? Show that she could? Remind him why he should kill them?

At least people were taking Wen Qing's appearance well, all things considered.

He'd sent servants to make sure she had as much food as she wanted, but A-Li gently reminded him that Wen Qing had lived in starving conditions on the Burial Mounds for the last year. Her stomach probably couldn't handle anything more than their simplest broths and some bread. Which only reminded him of how messed up the world was-

"A-Xuan," A-Li squeezed his hand, drawing him back to the present, "It's starting."

Jin Zixuan wanted to do something, but there was nothing to do yet except watch the memories of Wei Wuxian's descent into demonic cultivation and the world turning against him.

He spared a glance to where Guangyao sat, once again next to Zewu-Jun. He couldn't help but wonder what was going through his mind. Had he truly given up to the point where he didn't bother to defend himself? He hadn't even flinched when Hanguang-Jun almost killed him last night. He hadn't flinched when Chifeng-Zun almost executed him so long ago.

It was Jin Zixuan's choice now, whether to let him live or die, but as long as he was uncertain he wouldn't make an enemy of Guangyao.

**Wei Wuxian sat alone in the street. He coughed weakly, muttering to himself, "Jiang Cheng, what is taking you so long?"**

"How long did the procedure take?" Jin Guangshan asked.

The little spat between his wife and his bastard wasn't worth his attention. If anything, he was happy to see A-Xuan oppose her openly. Maybe he wasn't completely useless.

"Three days," Wen Qing answered.

It was almost amusing how Wen Qing tried to pretend she wasn't terrified. He'd seen the way she looked at Wen Ruohan, and she looked upon him in almost exactly the same way. Except where Wen Ruohan threatened her brother, Jin Guangshan succeeded in killing him.

"Surely it could go faster now that you've performed it successfully," Jin Guangshan mused.

“I will never do that again,” Wen Qing vowed.

“Not even for Wen Zhuliu’s other victims?” Lan Qiren asked.

“The procedure had a fifty percent chance of working when the donor was Wei Wuxian,” Wen Qing stated, her expression stoic, “Wei Wuxian has extraordinary pain tolerance and an exceptionally powerful core. He and Wanyin trained together from the core formation phase to young adulthood, so their cultivation styles were similar. Their spiritual energies were familiar to each other.”

“The chances of success decrease with every difference,” The prodigious doctor continued, “If the donor couldn’t handle the pain, the transfer could not work. If their core weren’t strong, it wouldn’t survive the transition. If the cultivation style of the donor and the recipient weren’t similar enough, the recipient’s body may reject the new core.”

“I sympathize with Wen Zhuliu’s other victims,” Wen Qing finished, “But the only people I can think of that could undergo the procedure and have similar odds are your nephews, Teacher Lan.”

It was impossible to tell if she was lying. Then again, she didn’t kill, and for many the loss of cultivation was a death sentence. Lower chances of success didn’t mean it wouldn’t work. She just didn’t want to take that risk.

But there were obvious ways to motivate her to take those risks.

**Wei Wuxian forced himself to his feet, grabbing at his chest. He decided to enter a teahouse, needing to lean on the pillar by the door after going up a short flight of stairs. He removed his hat.**

**“What would you like?” A server asked.**

**That’s when Wei Wuxian noticed the room was full of cloaked people. Wen disciples. He turned to leave, but was kicked back by Wen Zhuliu. Wei Wuxian broke the table he landed on, and immediately coughed up blood.**

**Wen Zhuliu looked at his hand, then Wei Wuxian, who met his gaze defiantly.**

Nie Huaisang forced himself to breathe and put aside his anger at his brother. He’d either choose to live or they’d find a way to force him to live. He wouldn’t really be losing his brother, so it was fine if he put a little distance between them.

He put aside his anger at Madam Jin as well. If she wasn’t so stubborn in her hatred of San-ge he’d think about recruiting her to help take down Jin Guangshan-

No. He could ponder all those things later.

Wei Wuxian didn’t talk about this time. Sure, Jiang Cheng and Hanguang-Jun probably had some inclinations, but Nie Huaisang never got around to asking.



Whatever Wen Chao was about to do would keep Wei Wuxian out of the war for three months.

He spared a thought for the possibility of Wei Wuxian refusing to return until Wen Zhuliu was dead. He wondered if the man could sense Wei Wuxian didn't have a core. If Wen Zhuliu could tell with a touch he didn't... He could also deny having melted Wei Wuxian's if the partial truth came out.

Wen Zhuliu needed to die to ensure Wei Wuxian could keep his secret.

**Wen Chao then entered with Wang Lingjiao.**

**Wei Wuxian got back up, only to be kicked down again.**

**Wen Chao stepped on his hand to prevent him from trying to rise again, "What now? Why can't you get up? Weren't you an arrogant brat back in the Xuanwu Cave? Try that again." He ground his foot onto the hand, "Try that again!"**

**Wei Wuxian couldn't do anything.**

Lan Wangji regretted not staying to help Wei Ying and Jiang Wanyin finish off Wen Chao.

If this was going where he thought it was...then he deserved far worse.

His brother shot him a warning look, which he met unrepentantly. His rage wouldn't lead him to foolish action. He was in control of himself. Xichen couldn't say the same. Lianfeng-Zun still sat next to him as though he weren't partially responsible for why they needed to be here at all.

"No sword, no cultivation," Uncle muttered, "How does he survive?"

"His wits," Lan Wangji answered.

At least there was some good to come out of this. Uncle could be harsh, but he was also fair. He recognized his mistakes with Wei Ying in the past. He would do better moving forward.

**The scene cut away to Wen Qing. She stood, hidden, as she watched an unconscious Jiang Cheng on the path.**

**He tossed in his sleep, before shouting, "No!" And sitting up. He checked his surroundings before centering himself. The golden core flared within him, and he smiled.**

**Jiang Cheng turned towards the mountain, "Immortal one!" He called out, then knelt in the dirt, "Thank you so much, Immortal one! I, Jiang-" He looked down, "Wei Ying, really appreciate your help. I can only kowtow to thank you for saving my life."**

**He then began his bows.**

**Wen Qing continued to watch him as he went down the mountain.**

“So that’s how they were separated,” Jiang Yanli sighed.

The surgery itself took three days. They both would have needed a few days to recover. A-Xian obviously decided to wait the bare minimum and make his way to the village. A-Cheng, who could recover faster with his golden core, needed to remain unconscious to avoid suspicion. If they’d timed it a little better, they would have arrived at the same time.

But fate once again chose suffering for her younger brothers.

“You stayed with me?” A-Cheng asked, “But Wen Chao…”

“I couldn’t just leave you alone and unprotected,” Wen Qing replied, “Besides… it was too late to escape Wen Chao.”

Perhaps, but it looked like Wen Ning was already gone. If they’d just left A-Cheng in the wilderness, maybe she could have returned to the Supervisory Office, gathered what she needed, and ran. Maybe Wen Chao would have been sufficiently distracted by A-Xian. Maybe enough of the disciples were loyal to her to cover her escape.

“You were imprisoned here?” Chifeng-Zun asked.

“Soon after, yes.”

**The memory went back to Wei Wuxian, who was now more bloodied by the Wen disciples. They held him up between them.**

**“Just give up,” Wen Chao drawled, “Where is Jiang Cheng?” He tilted his head, “What? You don’t want to talk? You know you can’t save him, even if you stay silent. Right now, Jiang Cheng is merely a waste. He’s no better than livestock. The Yunmeng-Jiang is done for.”**

**Wei Wuxian turned to look at him, his eyes filled with rage.**

**“While the old owners are gone, you as a dog better start wagging your tail to beg your new master for mercy,” Wen Chao continued gleefully. He stood and moved closer, “How about this? You caught me in a good mood today. All you need to do is lie on your stomach and crawl three rounds. Then I’ll let you go. Deal?”**

**Wei Wuxian just looked away.**

Jiang Cheng closed his eyes. What had he done to deserve such loyalty?

Not that Wen Chao would honor any deal even if the idiot had any sense of self-preservation.

If only he had his core…

“If you want to blame someone, you can blame me,” Wen Qing whispered, “If I hadn’t agreed to the surgery-“

“Do you blame yourself?” He interrupted.

Wen Qing had known the entire time that Wei Wuxian was without a core. She must have heard the disparaging rumors about his demonic cultivation. She must have felt how quickly the world turned against him. And it was her hands that removed his core. It didn't matter that it was his choice.

"Sometimes," She admitted, "It's hard not to."

Jiang Cheng hummed in agreement. It was hard to shake the guilt.

"Proper communication is the key to any relationship," Nie Huaisang commented.

Jiang Cheng snorted, "I didn't realize avoidance counted as proper communication."

His friend used his fan to hide his grimace, "Fair."

Jiang Cheng pushed down the urge to press for more information. From what he'd pieced together, Chifeng-Zun was ill. Nie Huaisang hadn't given up on finding a cure, but the older Nie had. It wasn't any of his business, and if Wen Qing was already working on a treatment, what help could he even offer?

Wei Wuxian would let Nie Huaisang hide as long as he needed to, so Jiang Cheng would do the same.

It wasn't at all because he still felt too young to be Sect Leader or how he didn't want this for Nie Huaisang for a long time. Being Sect Leader...it should have been something passed to them when they were ready. Not something forced on them by deaths, expected or unexpected.

**"Wei-dog," Wen Chao's amusement fell, "What do you mean by that look on your face?"**

**Wang Lingjiao rose, "Wen-gongzi asked you to kneel down. Didn't you hear him?"**

**Wei Wuxian breathed out, "Sorry about that, I just heard a dog barking. I didn't hear a man's voice. Did you?"**

**Wen Chao kicked him, "Beat him! Beat him to death!"**

**Wei Wuxian laid there as he was beaten. There was nothing he could do.**

Jin Guangyao watched the beating uncomfortably.

He'd frozen when Madam Jin confronted him. Er-ge gave him an ultimatum. Don't do any more crimes or risk breaking his heart forever.

He was still processing that he held enough of Er-ge's heart to shatter irreparably. It was difficult to comprehend that someone would love him regardless of what he did or who he became.

So when Madam Jin had him dragged and stripped, he did nothing. His earlier anger against his father no longer burned as passionately. Revenge against Jin Guangshan would take time. However, all it took was one more slip up for him to hurt Er-ge more.

What would Er-ge consider a crime? He was a Lan. The Lan had over three thousand disciplines. Surely he wasn't expected to now follow all of them? He assumed his sworn brother meant more than just the truly abhorrent crimes. Er-ge wanted him to be a better person, to walk the righteous path beside him.

So he didn't lie to Madam Jin.

He didn't try to turn the room against her and use this to garner more sympathy.

He didn't pull a weapon and kill the disciples who gleefully tore apart his robes. He didn't harm them.

He wasn't even plotting revenge on them specifically.

It made him feel small. It brought back too many memories of previous humiliations. Every part of him ached to share this feeling, to have them all be brought as low as they kicked him.

Then he'd imagine Er-ge locked away in seclusion, heart broken and guilt ridden, unable to muster up a smile, much less share it with the world. He didn't think he could stand that, either from the prison Da-ge would lock him in or from the hell Hanguang-Jun would send him to.

So he stayed frozen, unsure what the right actions were and what would break his agreement with Er-ge. He was too scared to ask, wary of the disappointment in admitting he wasn't entirely sure what was right or wrong.

**"Stop!" Wen Chao eventually ordered, "I will ask Wen Zhuliu to crush his golden core first. I want to hear him scream like that little bastard Jiang Cheng did."**

**"How wonderful," Wang Lingjiao complimented, "Let's melt his core first, then chop off his arm."**

**"How nice of you," Wei Wuxian commented, "Whatever torture techniques you've got, bring them on."**

**Wang Lingjiao lifted her chin, "Mark your words."**

**"You are going to die," Wen Chao said, "Why still play a hero?"**

**"It is exactly because I am about to die that I am not afraid. What I'm afraid of is that I won't die. If you have the guts, just torture me," Wei Wuxian challenged, "The crueller, the better. After I die, I'll turn into a ferocious ghost and haunt the Qishan Wen day and night, cursing you all"**

**"How can someone so smart have such terrible plans?" Lady Luo wondered.**

Nie Mingjue didn't know what to say. Huaisang was avoiding him. Xichen and Jin Guangyao needed more time to process what he'd told them, and whatever they'd discussed later. He couldn't be sure how much Lady Luo knew. It was hard to tell if she was angry because of that or just angry he was hurting Huaisang.

"They didn't end up killing him," Lady Qin pointed out, "So it can't be that terrible."

How naive.

At least this was a familiar form of punishment.

Whenever Huaisang was annoyed with him, he'd conspire with the elders to force him to have tea or go on walks with young ladies. Given how quick he was to anger, and his harsh demeanor, it never went well. Not that he planned to make some poor young woman an early widow, or leave a child fatherless at an early age.

With what he now knew of his younger brother, he had to wonder if even back then Huaisang doubted him. Did Huaisang think he could love another person more than him? That someone else could convince him to give up his cultivation and choose a longer life? Did he think so little of himself or their bond as brothers?

"There are worse things than death," Nie Mingjue reminded them.

"And yet..." Lady Qin hesitated, "Should one just resign themselves to death? At least life brings the possibility of change."

He tried not to flinch at her question.

In this specific instance, death for Wei Wuxian meant more power. Even if he still had the Yin Iron sword on him, it was too big a risk to use it in front of the Wens. If Wen Chao managed to bring it back to Wen Ruohan...it would have meant disaster for everyone. It was better to let him die with it in his possession and hope his spirit would get it away.

Was power worth a shorter life?

Nie Mingjue built his power to destroy Wen Ruohan and avenge his father.

Now, Nie Mingjue was too set in his ways, but Lady Qin had a point. As long as he was alive, he could change. He didn't know what was holding him back, why he couldn't just let his saber down and leave it. Maybe it was because of the threats the Yiling Patriarch and Jin Guangshan presented, but the former wasn't a real threat and the latter...

Jin Guangyao and Huaisang would see to the latter. Barring any new threats...he didn't need to be the strongest in the room.

**"Ha," Wen Chao dismissed, "Disciples of all Clans have received soul-calming ceremonies. You can't turn into a ferocious ghost. Don't listen to his crap."**

**Wei Wuxian laughed, "You can't be more wrong, Wen Chao. I didn't grow up in the Jiang Sect from birth. I am the son of a servant. I did not have the chance to go through**

**the ceremony. If I die with resentment and become a ferocious ghost to haunt you, you should be careful.” He kept laughing darkly.**

It wasn't something many thought about.

What would happen if they killed the Yiling Patriarch and he came back? He was already a resentful being. What more could he accomplish once freed of the limitations of a mortal form?

**Wang Lingjiao grabbed Wen Chao’s arm, “You shut your mouth. There is no such thing. People die and become skeletons underground. Wen-gongzi, we’ve been trying to catch him for so long. Wasn’t it all for punishing him? Don’t tell me you are going to let him go just because of his bullshit.”**

**“Of course not,” Wen Chao assured her, “Putting on an act to fool me?” He kicked him again, “You should think twice!”**

Lan Xichen thought about the worst things Wen Chao could do to Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian came through this with all his limbs and his life. Without a golden core, three months wasn’t enough time to recover from extremely serious injuries and go straight back to battle. Wei Wuxian could endure beatings. There was probably no pain that equaled the removal of his golden core.

He wasn’t kept a prisoner. Wen Chao was an idiot, but if Wei Wuxian was in his possession he would have given some evidence of such. Just to demoralize them.

“They’re near Yiling,” A-Yao murmured.

“Presumably,” Lan Xichen muttered back. That was where Wen Qing was stationed, and they couldn’t have made Jiang Wanyin travel that far.

“Perhaps we should be calling Wei Wuxian the Yiling Patriarch for a different reason,” A-Yao commented pointedly.

Lan Xichen inhaled sharply at his suggestion. The Burial Mounds had been the responsibility of the Wen Sect. They sealed the resentment within that area, but what better place to leave one’s enemies to suffer and die? They’d be attacked by the fierce corpses there, torn apart body and soul by the resentment that had lingered for centuries and would endure centuries more.

Surely no one could survive there?

Then again, everytime he doubted something terrible had happened to Wei Wuxian, he was wrong.

**Wen Chao turned away, “Wen Zhuliu.”**

**“Wait a second,” Wang Lingjiao interjected, “Wen-gongzi, it took us quite some effort to catch him. Wouldn’t it be a shame if he died so easily? Our fun is just about to**

**begin.”**

**They both turned back to Wei Wuxian. Wang Lingjiao pulled at his robes, holding up her brand. She pressed the tip of it into his skin, watching as it smoked. She cut a line down the already existing scar.**

**Wei Wuxian did nothing, but the pouch by his side stirred. Resentment trickled out until Wang Lingjiao stopped. Then the energy stopped.**

**At no point did Wei Wuxian give any other reaction.**

“Interesting,” Nie Huaisang said.

“What does that mean?” MianMian asked, wishing this could be a more private discussion.

“Well, obviously Wei-xiong masters demonic cultivation at some point, but I wonder...” Her friend trailed off, hitting his fan against the palm of his other hand, “That didn’t look deliberate, right?”

“No,” Jin Zixuan frowned, “He was in pain.”

“He was angry,” Jiang Wanyin corrected, “It responded to his anger.”

“A reaction, not a conscious action,” Teacher Lan mused, “Instinctive, not deliberate.”

“Can one accidentally use demonic cultivation?” Jin Guangshan asked.

“Considering Wei Wuxian’s unique situation,” The older man stroked his beard, “Everyone else who had their cores melted also had their meridians damaged. Wei Wuxian still has a fully functional spiritual system, he just lacks a core to power it. Resentment...”

“Energy is energy,” Hanguang-Jun said, repeating Wei Wuxian’s words from class.

A new source of power.

“Or it could be an offer?” Nie Huaisang suggested, “I mean, resentment has its own will because it comes from other beings, not ourselves.”

“You think the dead...what, pity him?” Jiang Wanyin frowned.

“They empathize with his suffering,” Jiang Yanli offered, “Or perhaps they crave violence?”

MianMian doubted they would truly get to see Wei Wuxian develop an instinctive reaction into a cultivation style. She didn’t trust the idiots here not to try copying it, despite the fact that they all had golden cores that would fight the corrupting resentful energy.

Then again, would having a golden core make things better or worse? Wei Wuxian couldn’t use his own spiritual energy to heal any damage from it, but maybe that was why he wasn’t as insane as Wen Ruohan and Xue Yang. Maybe balance wasn’t the way to go. Maybe Wei Wuxian was so powerful because he could give almost all of himself to the darkness.

“Wei Wuxian has never explained what he does,” Wen Qing kept her face blank, “Nor have I examined him medically.”

“Something to ask him later,” Nie Huaisang commented.

That no one challenged the existence of a later was noteworthy.

**“Wei-gongzi,” Wang Lingjiao huffed, “Back in the Xuanwu Cave, you got yourself badly hurt trying to be a hero and rescuing a damsel in distress.”**

**Wei Wuxian just laughed. He was forced down to his knees.**

**“Wei Ying,” Wen Chao drew closer, livid, “You really think you are not afraid of anything, that you’re brave and glorious, don’t you?”**

**Wei Wuxian drew himself up, “I didn’t expect that you could really speak the human language.”**

**“Showing off your speech again?” Wen Chao demanded, “Good! I’d like to see just how much longer you can keep up your backbone. Wen Zhuliu, pick him up.”**

A secondary location was never good.

The murmurs around the room got quiet. This was where Wei Wuxian would disappear. Anyone involved in the war effort heard how distracted Sandu Shengshou and Hanguang-Jun were during that time. Half of the reason they were always on the front lines was because they were looking for Wei Wuxian.

At the time, they’d considered it a waste of resources, but no one could dissuade them.

No one tried to dissuade them.

Wei Wuxian was about to disappear and come back as the master of his Yin Iron. He would come back as a master of demonic cultivation. The smiling, charming young hero would be replaced by a distant, dark potential villain.

**Wei Wuxian was carried between two Wen disciples as they rode their swords.**

**Eventually Wen Zhuliu held up a hand for them to stop.**

**Wei Wuxian stared at the ground far below, trying to make out where they were.**

**“Wei Ying,” Wen Chao said, “Do you know where we are? We are in Yiling. This place is called the Burial Mounds. You, the people of Yunmeng, must have heard its resounding name. It’s a mountain of corpses, an old battleground. You can dig up a corpse wherever your shovel points.”**

**Wei Wuxian finally looked afraid.**



**“Countless nameless corpses are randomly wrapped up and tossed here. Look at these dark clouds. Isn’t the hatred strong?” Wen Chao asked, “Isn’t the resentful energy thick? Even us, the QishanWen, weren’t able to repress it. So we rounded up this place and prevented people from going in. Let me tell you. This is still daytime.”**

**“Wait until the night,” Wen Chao taunted, “And you’ll get to see a marvelous exhibition of all sorts of things.” He laughed, “When a living person goes in, there is no return for the body or the soul. There is no way he can get out.” He reached out and touched Wei Wuxian, “Wei Ying. Let me see if you can keep smiling until the end.”**

**With that, he shoved Wei Wuxian off the sword.**

“No one can survive there.”

And yet, Wei Wuxian did.

And yet, Wei Wuxian went on to lead others to survive there.

“Do you still believe he could have chosen mediocrity?” Sect Leader Qin asked.

This was the final step towards demonic cultivation, and it wasn’t his choice to take it. He didn’t take the step, he was pushed. Literally.

“No one has survived in the Burial Mounds because no one was a demonic cultivator,” Zewu-Jun said, “No one had mastery of resentment.”

It made a terrible amount of sense.

If one wanted to cultivate properly, they went to a place with powerful natural energy.

Why wouldn’t one who cultivated the demonic path with such power have done so in a place consumed by resentment?

“There was no other way,” Sect Leader Jiang muttered.

**“You are going to be trapped there for eternity!” Wen Chao shouted after him.**

**Wei Wuxian fell, screaming as he did so. He turned around to face the sky, reaching out towards the Wen as though he could reach them.**

**As he fell, the pouch by his side glowed. The resentment inside began to scream.**

**Wei Wuxian stuck his hands out to either side, and something caught him. The resentful energy held him in place, wrapped around his entire body, just as it had against the Xuanwu. He looked at it curiously, and when his panic faded, so did the energy.**

**He fell into darkness and passed out as soon as he hit the ground.**

“It’s like he was chosen,” Her husband said, “What a terrible fate.”

Jiang Yanli was tired of crying, but at least she now knew why...why everything changed.

It wasn't a choice, it was a necessity, and even then, it wasn't something he consciously started doing. The resentment reacted to his strong emotions. It was a reflex.

She held her son closer. Her midwife had explained that there were a great many things her son would know at birth. If she brushed his cheek, he would turn towards it. If she touched the roof of his mouth, he would suck. If she held him up, his feet would move as though walking. If she pressed something into his hand, he would grasp it.

Jiang Yanli was warned those reflexes would fade, but her son would learn to do them himself. It would take months, and some would be a difficult transition.

It took time to learn to do something purposefully.

And every second in the Burial Mounds was torture.

**The memories skipped back to Wen Qing, who was led by Wen disciples to a cell. She was thrown inside, her hands already chained together. The door shut and locked behind her.**

**She looked around, then noticed her brother leaning against the wall. He was cut up and bleeding.**

**"A-Ning," She called out to him, "A-Ning."**

**Wen Ning woke up, "Jie."**

**Wen Qing got up and ran to him, "A-Ning, how are you? Are you alright?"**

**"Jie," Wen Ning smiled, "I didn't tell them anything." She cupped his face, then pulled him to her. She fought back tears as her brother continued, "Jie, how is Wei-gongzi? Did Jiang-gongzi get back to him?"**

Jiang Cheng hesitantly reached out to hold her hand.

"You were imprisoned that whole time," He said, purely for the others.

She was separated from her brother likely soon after. He wasn't sure what was worse. He now knew Wei Wuxian was in the Burial Mounds. He practically said as much when he went there a second time, but he should have guessed he was the reason it was viable.

Even though he had to watch him go through another impossible trial, he knew he'd survive.

Wen Ning didn't survive wherever he went.

At the end of their separation, Wen Qing didn't get to embrace her brother.

She got to cry over a corpse.

“Until you freed me,” She returned.

Wei Wuxian would free himself.

There was no comfort in the truth of where he’d disappeared to. There was no worse prison in the world, and yet...no one could say he was evil purely because of his cultivation path anymore.

And even if he had his golden core, being thrown in the Burial Mounds would lead to the same result.

**Wei Wuxian woke up in darkness. Around him, disembodied voices called his name.**

**“Wei Wuxian!” One sounded like Jiang Cheng.**

**“Wei-gongzi!” Another like Wen Ning.**

**“Wei Wuxian! Wei Wuxian!”**

**Wei Wuxian just laid there as the voices overlapped.**

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji’s voice called out clearly.**

**Wei Wuxian startled, seeming to come to life at his call.**

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji’s voice called again.**

**Wei Wuxian sat up.**

Lan Wangji stopped breathing.

It was one thing to have Wei Ying want to turn to him when he was desperate for a solution to Jiang Wanyin’s melted core. It was another to hear his own voice draw Wei Ying back to reality.

“Why does he hear Hanguang-Jun?”

Lan Wangji didn’t know. He couldn’t think past what this meant.

What did this mean? Did Wei Wuxian love him?

It had to mean something. At his lowest, Wei Ying turned to him. He found strength in just the sound of his voice, focus in the insistence of his name. Lan Wangji had never taken his title literally until this moment. He prayed he was a light in the dark, something to guide him, remind him he was loved.

That he was never alone. Not as long as they both existed in this world.

“Like a clarity bell,” Jiang Yanli stared at him.

The Jiang Sect clarity bell, capable of clearing the mind of those who hear it. It made one immune to the hallucinations of demonic entities.

Was this why Wei Ying never truly pushed him away until Qiongqi? Was this why he never sought his help? Was just being around him helpful? Did all it take was him saying his name?

If that wasn't love, if this power they had over each other wasn't love, then what was?

Wei Ying loved him.

As much happiness as that brought him, it made seeing him in the Burial Mounds unbearable.

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji’s voice drew his attention to the side.**

**There, the Yin Iron sword hovered, a safe haven of light in the endless dark. Wei Wuxian crawled towards it. He swatted at the resentment, his face screwed up in pain. It stopped his progress.**

**“Wei Wuxian, do you want revenge?”**

**“Don’t come closer!” Wei Wuxian growled.**

**“Wei Wuxian, let’s be together.” An unknown voice offered, “Do you want to stay?”**

**“Do you want to stay?” Other voices echoed.**

**When he looked up, the sword was in front of him. He reached up to take it, his hand trembling.**

**“Wei Wuxian,” The voices crooned, “Stay, Wei Wuxian. Don’t you want revenge?”**

**Wei Wuxian’s hand wrapped around the hilt.**

**“Let’s be together.”**

**“Do you want revenge?”**

**“Wei Wuxian, stay.”**

**“Do you want to stay?”**

**The screaming grew unbearable again.**

It was torture watching this scene. Even for those who didn't care for Wei Wuxian.

How could one stay sane surrounded by so many voices? Voices so loud and insistent they could pass for one's own thoughts. How long could one man stand against the will of thousands?

If Wei Wuxian broke here, never to recover, could they kill him?

No.

None of this was his own doing. None of this was his fault.

So why should he be punished?

**“Stay, Wei Wuxian. Do you want revenge? Let’s be together. Vengeance is ours.”**

**The resentment surrounded him again, and he let out a pained roar as he stabbed the sword into the ground.**

**“Wei Wuxian,” A deep voice purred, “Do you want revenge?”**

**Wei Wuxian looked up through the darkness, “Yes.”**

There was something different about that last voice.

“Could it be...” Nie Huaisang trailed off, “Xue Chonghai?”

That had to be the battle that formed the Burial Mounds. All the Sects came together against Xue Chonghai who possessed the whole Yin Iron. If there was ever a battle that promised that much devastation, it was the one that needed to be forgotten.

It was something he could ask Wei Wuxian later.

He doubted they’d be shown much more.

**Memories grew hazy from there.**

**Wei Wuxian sat in a field. His robes were torn in several places. Corpses shambled around an array he’d made of his own blood. He meditated, his palms upturned on his knees.**

**There were impossible images.**

**Battlefields.**

**Betrayals.**

**Death.**

**“Wei Ying.”**

“Inquiry can work on the nearly dead,” Uncle said.

The words carried in the silence of the room.

“That’s...quite a distance,” Lan Xichen replied.

He didn't know what else to say. Wei Wuxian looked more like a corpse than a living human. What could he eat there? Was there any water that wasn't tainted? What happened to someone if they could not see the sun? Did it count as sleep if it was undoubtedly plagued with nightmares? Just the stress of being there...

He forced himself to not think about the technicalities. Wei Wuxian survived.

"You weren't there," Uncle grimaced, "Wangji played whenever he had the time. With his power and...desperation..."

"Their connection," Lan Xichen added.

"Though it could just be a hallucination," A-Yao said, "A mental technique for whatever meditation he's doing."

"He said he used Lan Sect techniques," Wangji interjected.

Huaisang tilted his head with a frown, "Really? It looks to me like he's using Empathy."

By Lan Sect techniques, Wei Wuxian likely was just making fun of Wangji and the way Wangji used to ignore him. After all, the voices seemed to be getting quieter with every flash of cognizance, as though he were getting better at tuning them out.

"Empathy would be suicidal," Jiang Wanyin's eyes widened, "The chance of possession or losing yourself is high with one spirit. With a mass like this..."

"If anyone knows its limits it would be Wei-xiong," Huaisang shrugged, "I just think it would be the easiest way to establish a connection to their energy. If it came to a battle of wills...Wei-xiong has more reason to be in control."

A brother and sister who needed him. A soulmate who would be lonely without him.

A war effort that would fail without him.

"In many ways, resentful spirits are incomplete. They're broken," Lan Xichen reasoned, "They lose the parts of themselves unassociated with their obsession. They lose sight of what makes them human. While Wei Wuxian shares their bloodlust, he also still possesses a heart." His gaze flickered to Da-ge, "As long as he has what's important, he should stay in control."

Unlike Da-ge, who would one day lose control.

What would happen to his sworn brothers wasn't up to him. Da-ge would choose his own path. Jin Zixuan would do what was best for the Jin Sect regarding A-Yao. What Xichen could do was focus on his real brother and helping Wei Wuxian.

**Wei Wuxian looked worse every time he came back to himself. His face was thinner, his skin paler.**

**"Stop," He ordered, and the corpses did.**

**He whistled, and they fought.**

**Wei Wuxian crafted a bamboo flute out of the dark growth. He played a few experimental notes.**

**Wei Wuxian played confidently, the center of a storm of resentment.**

Three months.

Wei Wuxian was in hell for three months. That's how long it took him to master demonic cultivation.

He needed to. Xue Chonghai went insane and lost himself to the Yin Iron. Wen Ruohan was following the same path. Xue Yang was probably insane with or without external influence. Wei Wuxian likely could have used the Yin Iron to escape sooner, but then he risked going down the same path as their enemies.

Instead of simply controlling the Yin Iron, he mastered resentful energy itself.

He was powerful without the Stygian Tiger Amulet.

Wei Wuxian spent three months in hell, and because of that, he was stronger than Wen Ruohan.

**Wei Wuxian lowered the flute and muttered to himself, "It's time."**

**He brought out the Yin Iron sword in a cave. He frowned at it, "I can't take you to war. Not like this." He threw it out, letting it hover in front of him, "Function follows form." He lifted his flute and began to play.**

**The sword resisted the manipulation, but eventually began to shift form.**

**It became the two halves of the Stygian Tiger Amulet.**

"I'd think a sword would be more useful," Jin Guangshan commented.

Nie Mingjue gritted his teeth, "A sword kills. An amulet protects."

The form influenced the function. Stygian because it was forged in hell. Tiger because the animal symbolized yin energy. An amulet because Wei Wuxian was a master of talismans and amulets were similar.

It was more than the Yin Iron because it served a purpose. Yet the new form did not erase the long, bloody history of its existence as a sword. Wei Wuxian couldn't change the nature of the metal itself, but he could try to control where it was directed.

"Still...it sounds as though he can't control it," Sect Leader Ouyang worried.

Jin Zixuan scoffed, "I wonder why it would be hard to control an object that absorbs resentment in a place where resentment blocks out the sun."

“Is it secure in the Burial Mounds now?” Jin Guangshan asked.

Wen Qing took a drink of her tea before answering, “It is sealed until Wei Wuxian finds a way to destroy it.”

“He plans to destroy it?” Nie Mingjue demanded.

They couldn’t destroy his family’s sabers. Not without a backlash that caused more harm than leaving the sabers be. The Stygian Tiger Amulet was the most powerful weapon in existence. He couldn’t imagine the damage to the surrounding area that would come from destroying it and dispersing the energy.

Nor was anyone strong enough to destroy it. The Amulet would protect itself.

“It only obeys him because he created it,” Wen Qing said slowly, “If anything were to happen to him...”

It could be a lie, but he’d already wronged her enough. He wouldn’t accuse her of lying. Especially when they encountered the same problem with the sabers. They only obeyed their master. No one else.

Not that he could share that information.

His mind kept going back to his cultivation style. Was it even sustainable? With each new saber there needed to be more corpses. The problem would just keep growing and growing until eventually it was exposed, or their family tomb became a miniature Burial Mounds itself.

“Chifeng-Zun, are you well?” Lady Qin whispered to him.

No. He wasn’t.

“I have too much on my mind,” Nie Mingjue admitted.

“That’s an understatement,” Lady Luo muttered.

“At least we know Wei Wuxian didn’t want to be a demonic cultivator,” Lady Qin smiled gently, as though all his problems had to do with being wrong about Wei Wuxian and not about being wrong about his entire life. Her words once again accidentally cut too deep.

Around the room, he could hear her sentiments being echoed. Wei Wuxian didn’t choose to go down this path. He simply kept going where he was forced. The problem now was whether or not he maintained his sanity.

How much did three months in the Burial Mounds change?



Look at me, introducing new characters 160,000 words into a fic. CQL never says how Qin Su and JGY met, so just assume they've interacted a little at previous events but Qin Su isn't pursuing him. I know what's in the novel, but there's no way that fits into the CQL timeline so I'm just gonna ignore it.

I'm not extremely happy with this chapter, so if you could refrain from anything negative in the comments, that would be nice.

Onto the Sunshot Campaign! Thank you all for your continued support! Let's see if this can break 3,000 kudos!

Edit 12 June 2021: Wow we broke 3,000 fast! Also a thank you for all the kind comments! I'm so happy you liked this chapter!

# The Hardest Words

## Chapter Summary

I love you but...

-I wish I didn't

-I can't help you

-You've changed

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was a tense atmosphere in the room.

Wei Wuxian had changed, but who could remain the same after three months in the Burial Mounds? They all noticed he was off, but could one integrate back into society after spending months with only the company of the dead?

There was still the chance that he lost control, that his demonic cultivation was eroding his sanity and he was dangerous, but...how much was due to trauma?

Cultivators were no stranger to trauma. Many disciples had reached their breaking point before, during, and after the war. The mind could only handle so much before it turned on itself. There were only so many battles one could partake in before they followed one into their dreams, or even their waking moments.

They could all think of someone who was never the same after being pushed too far.

Those people could also be dangerous, but they just needed help. Peace.

**Lan Wangji walked up the steps of the Indoctrination Camp. At the top, he could hear the Wen disciples talking to each other, “He was just the son of a servant. In a Yiling teahouse, we beat him up like a sandbag. Too bad you weren’t there. You didn’t see the look on his face when he was thrown down.”**

**“Yes!” Another cheered.**

**“Do you think he can climb up again? Be an arrogant brat again?” They laughed, “In the end, our boss is the best.”**

**“Here, let’s raise our glass to our boss.”**

Lan Qiren wondered where Wangji got his dramatic antics from.

It certainly wasn't him.

There had been a notable, though perhaps only notable to himself and Xichen, shift in his youngest nephew's demeanor since the revelation that Wei Wuxian was thrown in the Burial Mounds. Wangji had watched the memories intensely, searching for the answer to his questions.

Now, it seemed he had all he needed.

"Wangji," Lan Qiren whispered, "I didn't expect you to be so calm."

There had been anger, but that melted away as Wei Wuxian grew more powerful. He was curious why, though he knew he wouldn't be happy with the answer.

"Wei Ying loves me," Wangji replied.

"Oh," Xichen sighed.

"It was obvious," Lianfeng-Zun commented under his breath.

Lan Qiren didn't agree, but there was such certainty in his nephews that he doubted his own instinct. It would be impossible to dissuade Wangji from this course of action now that he knew his feelings were returned. He mentally calculated how quickly they could pull together a wedding and hoped that time was enough to prevent them from eloping.

Wei Wuxian was shameless and unrestrained, but he wasn't evil.

He made Wangji happy.

"Then you have my blessing," Lan Qiren said, unable to keep some bitterness out. It would be a difficult conversation with the elders. He wouldn't let Wei Wuxian be treated like his brother's wife, and while the disciples here perked up at his quiet words and spread them back cheerfully, there would be some resistance to integration. Even if he said it was rehabilitation.

"You can present him with a ribbon after this," Xichen permitted.

"Two," Wangji replied.

"Two ribbons?" The elder of the two frowned.

"Hm," Wangji blushed slightly, "For Wei Ying and our son."

Lan Qiren closed his eyes and took a deep breath. If Wangji had met the child, and the Jiang siblings made no mention of a child, then it had to be a Wen child. A Wen child currently living in the Burial Mounds, who had been liberated from a Jin Sect labor camp. A child Lan Qiren wouldn't have believed existed until yesterday.

He released the breath slowly. His grandnephew and heir to GusuLan was living in the Burial Mounds. Being raised by Wei Wuxian no less!

He wouldn't embarrass himself with any more public outbursts.

**Lan Wangji could see them now.**

**“We even exterminated the YunmengJiang.” They kept laughing, “The son of a servant is nothing.”**

**“Right.”**

**Lan Wangji reached the top and didn't hesitate to strike one down.**

**With their attention on him, he continued the attack, using his strings to choke them.**

Lan Xichen was the worst uncle in the world.

To be fair, he hadn't known this nephew existed, but he didn't feel like being fair to himself.

A-Yao probably did.

“What's his name?” Lan Xichen forced himself to ask.

He would ask questions this time. Wei Wuxian wasn't the selfish, cold-hearted demonic cultivator he had assumed. Wei Wuxian loved his brother. He was a good man who hid the reasoning behind his decisions out of love for his family. Lan Xichen was wrong to make as many assumptions as he did.

“A-Yuan,” Wangji whispered fondly.

“The boy from Wen-guniang's village,” A-Yao said.

There had been a little boy. Lan Xichen didn't have A-Yao's memory, but he recalled a small boy curled up in one of the men's arms.

“Did you kill his parents?” Lan Xichen asked.

A-Yao froze, “Possibly. I could attempt to recreate the records, but Wen-guniang would know about her village best.”

All the other Wens were either deep in hiding or dead. It would be impossible to know the true scale of their demise. He remembered the guards from Qiongqi Pass. He'd thought they were incompetent, but few cultivators would enjoy being prison guards. They were trained to deal with the dead and demonic, not the living.

Of course the true records were destroyed. Just something else that could be attributed to the incompetence of others. Or even Jin Zixun, if that was still Jin Guangshan's plan to get through this still in power.

Everyone had a part to play in this tragedy.

Then it hit him how much help this little boy would need.

“What’s he like?” Lan Xichen glanced at his brother.

Wangji smiled slightly, not sharing his worries, “Like Wei Ying.”

A smiling child then. One that smiled despite his circumstances. Maybe he’d come out of his childhood with one extreme phobia, likely of darkness.

Now that he knew about his nephew he ached to send someone to retrieve him. If he were in danger of malnutrition or illness Wangji would have brought him to Gusu. Wei Wuxian wasn’t selfish. He wouldn’t allow his child to die rather than send him away.

“Lan Yuan,” Lan Xichen whispered to himself.

Maybe it would be Wei Yuan? It couldn’t stay Wen.

“Are there more children there?”

Wangji shook his head.

A-Yao turned further away, “I’m surprised one survived.”

**Once they were all down, Jiang Cheng joined him. The other Lan disciples quickly followed.**

**“Kneel,” Lan Wangji ordered, and those who were still standing obeyed, “Where is Wei Ying?”**

**The disciples exchanged looks. The one being choked raised his hand.**

**“Speak,” Lan Wangji permitted.**

**“I’ll tell you,” The disciple said, “We threw Wei Wuxian into the Burial Mounds. There is nothing left of him. Neither skeleton nor soul.”**

**Lan Wangji didn’t react. He just turned and went down the steps.**

“I can’t believe those were true,” Nie Huaisang muttered.

And Da-ge almost forbade Hanguang-Jun and Jiang Cheng from continuing to search for Wei Wuxian during the war.

“Well,” He continued after a pause, “Everything but his death. That was exaggerated.”

Jiang Cheng scowled as one of his disciples commented, “Death might have been kinder.”

“Kinder, sure,” Nie Huaisang agreed, “But fate is seldom kind.”

It was an acceptable belief to have spread around the room. Fate implied it wasn’t a choice. Fate implied a force stronger than them, a divinity they mere mortals couldn’t understand. If it was Wei Wuxian’s destiny to become a demonic cultivator then could they punish him? None of his choices were ever really choices.

Take up the Yin Iron or be eaten by the Xuanwu. Learn demonic cultivation or be consumed by the Burial Mounds. Use the Stygian Tiger Amulet or lose the war.

It seemed harsh, to think Wei Wuxian was fated to a life full of scorn and darkness, but if that was the path given to him at birth, if it was all because he was born under an unlucky star, then who were they to judge him?

“It’s not too late for him,” Wen Qing commented.

Nie Huaisang wasn’t a huge believer in fate, but he did wonder who it was too late for.

**Jiang Cheng joined him, “It’s been three months. We made a deal that we would meet up at the teahouse in Yiling. He never showed up. I thought he took off on his own to find you in Lanling. Could it be that he fell into the Burial Mounds?” His eyebrows furrowed.**

**“Lan-er-gongzi,” A Lan disciple announced. In his arms were their swords.**

**Jiang Cheng took his back.**

**“This sword belongs to Wei-gongzi,” Another said.**

**Lan Wangji took Suibian and stared at it. He tried to draw the blade, but couldn’t.**

“Is it impossible for him to take up the sword again?” Jin Zixuan wondered.

He looked at Lan Qiren when he asked. He thought having Wen Qing around would bring more clarity for what he should do, but he just found it hard to look at her. She was a physical reminder of all the wrong his Sect had done. Not that Wen Qing was ever looking his way. She seemed to resolutely be ignoring any gold in the room.

“That would depend on how integral the resentment has become to his body,” Zewu-Jun answered slowly, “He doesn’t have a core to heal the damage, so either it’s not as damaging as previously thought-”

Chifeng-Zun snorted, earning a strange look from both of his sworn brothers. Though it was a ridiculous idea that resentment wasn’t as dangerous as centuries of evidence said it was.

“-or Wei Wuxian has found a way to use it to counter the damage it causes,” Zewu-Jun glanced at Wen Qing, because he wasn’t a coward, “Perhaps it recognizes him as a host, in which case it would be extremely difficult to remove it. It would resist and damage him further, this time with nothing in its place to help with healing.”

“That is all without mentioning his lack of core,” Lan Qiren added, “Though he would have to be purged of resentment before a solution to that could be found. If it’s at all possible.” He also looked at Wen Qing.

Wen Qing sighed, “I need to do more research.”

Jin Zixuan hoped Wei Wuxian could cultivate normally again. It would solve a lot of problems.

“Could Jiang Wanyin have pulled Suibian?” Chifeng-Zun asked.

“Yes,” Wen Qing answered.

Jin Zixun flinched. That would have been a terrible way to find out about the core transfer. He reached to the side to touch Suihua. He wasn’t sure if he wanted his sword to never be used again if he couldn’t wield it, or if he would rather it go to someone in his family.

**The memory skipped to Jin Zixuan leading his disciples into the Unclean Realm. He stopped in front of the gates, looking at the decapitated head hanging there. He turned to Jin Zixun, “Wen Xu is dead?”**

**“It is unexpected,” Jin Zixun grinned, “Chifeng-Zun was very valiant. He chopped off Wen Xu’s head with just one swing.”**

**A bird croaked from its perch on a corpse. Jin Zixuan sent a talisman at it to cause it to fly away.**

**“Zixuan,” Jin Zixun said, “Why did you waste a talisman on a crow? These animals can’t often feed on these things. Why not let them have a big meal today?”**

**“Is there a lack of dead bodies these days?” Jin Zixuan demanded, “Give out my orders. Ask our people to help with collecting the bodies.” Jin Zixun hesitated, before obeying, “Come and clean this place up.”**

Nie Mingjue should have done that.

It was his realm. His disciples were responsible for their deaths. He should have seen to their remains.

Except he hadn’t cared. The enemy didn’t deserve any respect. Huaisang had suggested something, then whined about the stench and how it ruined the scenery. He’d been too absorbed in the war to listen to him.

It was also jarring to be of the same mind as Jin Zixun, even if his mind had changed since then.

“How terrible,” Lady Qin whispered, “Why would you keep his head like that?”

To insult Wen Ruohan. To warn off any future attacks. Because he was extremely proud of himself for taking the son away from the man who murdered his father.

“A lot of people make choices they wouldn’t make outside of war,” Lady Luo replied.

“Still...” The young lady shuddered, “It was good of Jin-gongzi to have them cleared away.”

“Or perhaps just a sign of our lack of involvement,” Lady Luo grimaced, “The Jin Sect suffered the least, thus had the least vengeance.”

“At least Jin Zixuan fought at all,” Nie Mingjue commented.

“At least,” Lady Luo agreed.

Lady Qin’s eyes widened, “Was there a chance they wouldn’t have?”

That question caused a stir. Nie Mingjue knew what his disciples believed. The answer to that was a worrying yes. Public favor was on the verge of turning against Jin Guangshan as more and more people saw the Jin Sect’s actions being led by Jin Zixuan. Yes, a son’s actions reflected their upbringing, but it was also telling that the Sect Leader himself did nothing.

“Of course we would have fought,” Jin Guangshan looked his way.

Nie Mingjue shifted to fully block his view of the two young ladies next to him. He scowled, “Even if I hadn’t killed Wen Xu?”

Wen Xu’s death had been one turning point in the war. It made their victory seem less daunting. The odds were no longer stacked against them with Wen Ruohan’s right hand gone.

Wei Wuxian’s return was the next. He tipped the scale in their favor.

“That’s unfair,” Jin Guangshan scoffed, “The past is what it is.”

“And yet how much has changed just by understanding it fully?” Jin Zixuan asked.

**Jiang Yanli sat in her cart, “Nothing can be seen these days but corpses covering plains.” She rose to get out when Jin Zixuan returned to her.**

**He held out a hand to help, then retracted it, “Jiang-guniang, we are here.”**

**Jiang Yanli walked towards the gates, flinching at the sight of the hanging head.**

**Again, Jin Zixuan moved to help her, but hesitated.**

**She noticed, but didn’t comment, “Thank you for your kindness these couple of months, Jin-gongzi. Now we have arrived at Qinghe, I shall say goodbye.” She turned away.**

**“Jiang-guniang,” Jin Zixuan called after her, “Jiang-guniang. Wei Wuxian entrusted you to me- to the Jin Sect. I should wait for Jiang Cheng to deliver you...”**

**Jiang Yanli turned to him, “A-Cheng? You have news of A-Cheng?”**

Jin Guangshan narrowed his eyes at his own son.

Was he choosing now of all times to challenge him? He always knew his wife had coddled the boy. Didn’t he know better than to feel guilty? Guilt was a weakness those in power



couldn't afford. Otherwise that would be taken advantage of.

At least there was one area he could hope to gain back some power.

His son's incompetence when courting his wife.

It was always Wei Wuxian who confronted A-Xuan. Considering his bad reputation, even the worst of his insults to A-Li were doubted by the masses. When A-Yao started fueling rumors, he made sure to pit A-Xuan against Wei Wuxian.

Considering Wei Wuxian's propensity for secrets, he had to wonder how much Jiang Wanyin was told.

Did A-Xuan really think he had any friends amongst his agetates? If Jiang Wanyin decided to take insult, as anyone else in his position would have if properly informed, then Nie Huaisang would side with him. That automatically guaranteed Nie Mingjue's, and Lan Xichen would follow with both his sworn brother and real brother's decisions.

Would A-Xuan really challenge him if he was all he had?

**As if summoned by the mention of himself, Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji landed outside the Unclean Realm. He shouted, "A-Jie!"**

**Jiang Yanli ran over and grasped his arms, "A-Cheng. You're okay now. You recovered."**

**Jiang Cheng nodded, "A-Jie."**

**Then they were embracing.**

It was a relief to see something good after such prolonged suffering and darkness.

Even if the image wasn't complete without Wei Wuxian.

**Lan Wangji took a deep breath, then started towards the Unclean Realm. Jin Zixuan followed, "Lan-er-gongzi. Congratulations on your successful revenge. This is..." His gaze lingered on Suibian, "This sword belongs to Wei Wuxian. Did you..."**

**"Qishan Indoctrination Bureau," Lan Wangji said, "It's burned."**

**Jin Zixuan's sword was returned to him by one of his disciples, "Excellent. I brought hundreds of disciples from the Jin Sect. I meant to consult with you about the attack on the Indoctrination Bureau to retrieve our swords. You're one step ahead." His examination complete, he let the blade fall to his side.**

**"Oh right," Jin Zixuan remembered, "Where is Wei Wuxian? He asked me to look after his sister. Now I can finally hand her over."**

**"Where is A-Xian?" Jiang Yanli asked her brother.**

**“Wei Wuxian...” Jin Zixuan continued, “Where is he?”**

**“Where is A-Xian?” Jiang Yanli repeated, her smile eager.**

**Jiang Cheng just bowed his head, and they both cried.**

Jiang Yanli wished A-Xian could see how much they missed him.

Not just herself and A-Cheng, though she was sure he assumed they would be more angry with him than forlorn. There was also Hanguang-Jun’s silent grief, and A-Xuan’s thinly veiled worry. And with the welcome Nie Huaisang gave him, she was certain he missed her younger brother fiercely.

A-Xian needed to understand that their lives wouldn’t be better without him.

Maybe if he understood that he would be less likely to sacrifice himself.

Their lives were all intertwined.

**Later in the day, Nie Mingjue oversaw a war meeting of all the major Sects. He banged on his table, “The Wen Sect treated people with barbarity and got their way by any means. They shall face the wrath of God and the resentment of men.”**

**“Chifeng-Zun killed a son of Wen Ruohan,” Jin Zixuan stood in front of him, “It’s like crippling one arm of Wen Ruohan. It brings comfort to the deceased of the Jiang Sect.”**

**Nie Mingjue looked up at him.**

**“Our men will not rest until Wen Chao and Wen Zhuliu are dead,” Jiang Cheng growled.**

**“That’s right,” Nie Mingjue agreed, “A life for a life. All the members of the Wen Sect are going to be executed by this blade.” At his look, Baxia shook.**

Wen Qing couldn’t help but flinch.

It was comforting that even in the middle of war, Jiang Wanyin still differentiated between Wens. He specifically stated Wen Chao and Wen Zhuliu. It was Chifeng-Zun who widened the sentence to all. It was Chifeng-Zun who mounted a head at the entrance to the Unclean Realm to gloat about how many he killed.

She understood many members of her family deserved the fates they met, but she couldn’t help the jolt of fear that that mindset hadn’t changed. That they would reach the end of this and still receive the same death sentence.

Jiang Wanyin had never quite let go of her hand, but his grip instantly tightened, “Chifeng-Zun no longer wants that.”

“I don’t,” Chifeng-Zun agreed, “Wen-guniang, we all owe you a debt that can never be repaid.”

Because of her and A-Ning, the Jiang Sect survived. Because the Jiang Sect survived, the war was won. It was almost ironic. She'd never rebelled because she thought her actions wouldn't change anything.

Yet Wen Ruohan fell because she and her brother saved three people.

"Those were the words of a bloodthirsty and ignorant man," Chifeng-Zun continued.

Wen Qing forced her heart to stop racing in instinctive panic. She met his gaze, "Have you changed that much?"

Nie Huaisang lifted his fan to hide his expression, but he stared at his brother.

As long as Chifeng-Zun cultivated with his saber, he would be prone to rage. Even if he recognized her now as an ally, what was to stop his saber from influencing his mood? What was to stop it from reigniting his rage against anyone with the name Wen? Over a decade's worth of hatred couldn't be soothed, not with just the blood of his enemies.

From what she'd been studying to try and prevent, even Nie Huaisang may not be safe from him when his qi deviated fatally.

It was Chifeng-Zun's turn to fight back a flinch.

He didn't answer.

"Stubborn idiot," Nie Huaisang hissed.

Jiang Wanyin just squeezed her hand again, "You'll tell me later?"

It wasn't her secret to tell. The golden core transfer hadn't been either. So many people had kept secrets from this man so she just nodded. It wasn't like they could keep it a secret from him when she was working out of Lotus Pier, and she would not live in the Unclean Realm with such instability.

Later could mean a lot of things.

**Jin Zixuan turned to the map, "At this time, the supervisory offices in Langya and Qinghe have fallen. Zewu-Jun led the disciples of the Lan Sect back to Cloud Recesses. It won't take long for them to reclaim Gusu. Then all that is left are Yunmeng and Yiling."**

**Lan Wangji's eyes widened and he moved in front of Nie Mingjue to salute, "Chifeng-Zun, I request a battle assignment."**

**Jiang Cheng grabbed his sword and joined him, "Chifeng-Zun. Me too."**

**Nie Mingjue looked between the two of them, "Which battlefield have you two chosen?"**

**"Yiling," Jiang Cheng declared.**

**“Yiling,” Nie Mingjue repeated, “Yiling is in the Southwest next to Qishan’s fortress. It is impregnable.”**

**“Chifeng-Zun,” Lan Wangji insisted.**

**Looking between the two, Nie Mingjue stood up and walked around the table, “Okay. You can go. Take off tomorrow, but stay away from the main road so that you do not alert our enemy.”**

**Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji exchanged a look, before bowing in unison. They then left together.**

“It’s kinda funny how well you two got along when Wei-xiong was missing,” Nie Huaisang commented.

Jiang Cheng glowered at him, “We had a better chance of finding him together.”

Jiang Cheng knew Wei Wuxian. At least, he thought he did, but even with all his deceptions he was almost certain he would have found the idiot. He was able to filter through rumors, guess which random wanderers were Wei Wuxian in disguise and which were just strangers. Or maybe just a waiter who would mention a man who wanted too much spice on his meals.

Something. Anything. He knew Wei Wuxian enough that the smallest clue would have led to their reunion.

Lan Wangji had Inquiry. Wei Wuxian insisted on bothering him in life, that wouldn’t have changed in death. If Lan Wangji was anywhere in the vicinity of Wei Wuxian’s spirit, he would have known instantly.

“I’m sure that’s all it was,” Nie Huaisang grinned, “Not at all because you were worried.”

About Hanguang-Jun? He scoffed, “About Wei Wuxian.”

If Wei Wuxian would have been worried about Hanguang-Jun...that was another matter.

Zewu-Jun surprised him by offering a small smile, “Thank you, Jiang Wanyin.”

Jiang Cheng fought the urge to duck his head. So what if for a brief moment, before Wei Wuxian returned and he remembered all the reasons Hanguang-Jun was an asshole, he stuck a little closer to the Lan? It was bad enough one reckless idiot was missing. They didn’t need one of their strongest fighters running himself into the ground trying to find him.

It wasn’t at all that he was missing his brother and sister, and that worry had to go somewhere.

**Jin Zixuan waited a moment, then bowed to take his leave.**

**“Jin-gongzi,” Nie Mingjue made him pause.**

**“Chifeng-Zun, how can I help you?” Jin Zixuan asked.**

**“Meng Yao,” Nie Mingjue said, “Has he been behaving himself at the Jin Sect?”**

**“Meng Yao?” Jin Zixuan frowned, “Isn’t he serving the Nie Sect? When did he come to the Jin Sect?”**

**“What?” Nie Mingjue asked.**

**“Since we last met at the Lan Sect, I haven’t seen Meng Yao again,” Jin Zixuan explained, “And...my father...my father would not...”**

**Nie Mingjue nodded, then gestured for him to leave.**

Jin Guangyao felt as if he were doused in cold water.

He’d been so focused on Wei Wuxian and what it meant for him in the Jin Sect he’d completely forgotten that Da-ge shared his memories of the war. He’d nearly succeeded in displaying him as a murderer with just the Captain in the Unclean Realm. If he was showing how worried he’d been for him in the war...

He was building up for the betrayal when Da-ge found him in Wen Ruohan’s Palace.

Because of course Da-ge was still concerned about him after he was kicked out of the Nie Sect. Of course he cared what happened to him. He was a fool to think he’d ever just been a servant to him.

There were more whispers about his father, but those were nothing new. Jin Guangshan would never have acknowledged him if it hadn’t been for his spy work and assassination of Wen Ruohan. Most of the room’s occupants wouldn’t allow a bastard into their Sect unless he already had some merits. They had to be useful.

“I didn’t know you tried to look for me,” Jin Guangyao managed to say.

“You are a very capable man,” Da-ge didn’t look at him, “I expected to hear of your accomplishments. When I did not, I became worried.”

“But you were already part of the Wen Sect then,” Huaisang commented.

Jin Guangyao nodded his head, “I joined shortly after the Sunshot Campaign officially started.”

“How did you manage that?” Jin Zixuan wondered.

“It wasn’t hard. Wen Ruohan knew me as the young man kicked down the steps of Koi Tower and banished from the Unclean Realm,” Jin Guangyao shrugged, aiming for casual rather than show how worried he was, “He thought I wanted revenge. When you have what someone wants, you can control them.”

“All lies have pieces of truth,” Madam Jin sneered.

“What I wanted was to keep Er-ge safe,” Jin Guangyao countered.

He wanted many things. His desires were conflicted enough that Wen Ruohan hadn't doubted his loyalties.

But everyone would now. If they saw him torture Da-ge...they would also wonder if he only killed Wen Ruohan to save his own neck. They'd wonder if he'd just played both sides, waiting until one looked like they were certain of victory before fully devoting himself to it.

It wasn't like their doubt was undeserved. If Jin Zixuan decided he was irredeemable...

**That night, Jiang Yanli brought Jiang Cheng soup. Suibian sat on the table next to him.**

**"It's not easy for us to see each other," She explained, "And you will be gone tomorrow. I can't sleep even if I try."**

**"A-Jie," Jiang Cheng took her hand, "It's all my fault. I didn't take good care of you. I made you worry about us every day."**

**Jiang Yanli patted his head, "A-Cheng, my little brother, has grown up." She patted their hands, "As your sister, there is nothing I can do now but to worry about you." She drew back, "Drink it before it gets cold."**

**Jiang Cheng hesitated, then did so, "A-Jie, it tastes great."**

**"A-Cheng," Her eyes grew watery, "Please bring A-Xian back."**

**"Most definitely," He promised.**

**A tear slipped down her face as she looked at Suibian.**

**"It must be nice to have a sibling," Qin Su commented.**

MianMian was an only child herself, but she had joined the Jin Sect at a young age and used to consider many of her martial siblings as close enough to her family. It got complicated as they got older, when politics started interfering with their purpose as cultivators...

Then again, wasn't that the same with the real siblings in the room?

There was Jiang Wanyin, Jiang Yanli, and Wei Wuxian, who loved each other but could not help each other, and thus suffered when the other suffered. Then there was Hanguang-Jun and Zewu-Jun. It had to hurt that Zewu-Jun believed Lianfeng-Zun about Wei Wuxian, the love of his brother's life. She didn't even want to get started on Lianfeng-Zun and Jin Zixuan.

Or whatever was going on between Nie Huaisang and Chifeng-Zun.

But it could be nice to have siblings.

**"They say a sibling is the longest connection you will have in life," Chifeng-Zun said, "Even if you drift apart, you are bound to come back together eventually."**

His gaze drifted to where Nie Huaisang sat.

“Are you really going to wait for eventually?” MianMian asked quietly.

Chifeng-Zun took a deep breath, “He’s angry.”

“Is there anything you could do to calm him down?” Qin Su inquired. She was a smart young woman. She picked up on the tension between the Nie brothers and followed her lead in blaming the older one for it.

“He just doesn’t understand,” Chifeng-Zun grumbled.

“Oh, I doubt that,” MianMian frowned, “There is very little Nie Huaisang doesn’t understand.”

**That night, Wei Wuxian stood on the rooftop and played Chenqing. Resentment poured off him, his music reflecting the screams of the dead.**

**Through a window, he watched Wang Lingjiao panic. She screamed and threw around her possessions. With shaky hands, she picked up a shattered piece of a jar, taking it to her own face.**

**Wei Wuxian barely paused in his playing to throw her a piece of white cloth. It hung from the ceiling.**

**Wang Lingjiao slowly made her way to it, making a noose that she hung herself with.**

**When she was dead, Wei Wuxian stopped playing.**

The room fell silent again.

This was the Yiling Patriarch’s revenge.

This was Wei Wuxian fresh out of the Burial Mounds. Three months of only the vengeful dead for company. A death dealer.

“I wonder who she saw.”

There were likely a high number of ghosts haunting Wang Lingjiao.

How many ghosts did they have haunting them?

**Later, Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng approached the Supervisory Office with their disciples. At a gesture from Jiang Cheng, they pulled their swords and prepared for battle.**

**“There’s a strong evil presence,” Jiang Cheng warned.**

**“And the smell of blood,” Lan Wangji agreed.**

**Jiang Cheng opened the doors with Zidian. Their disciples entered, but only found corpses. Jiang Cheng followed. Lan Wangji did the same after a pause to look at a talisman.**

**Jiang Cheng knelt by a corpse, tilting its face to look at him, “He bled out of all the holes in his head.”**

**Lan Wangji knelt by another, “This one didn’t.”**

**Jiang Cheng examined his surroundings, “Hanged, burned, drowned, poisoned. They all died of different causes. It seems the mission today was finished by something unknown.”**

Something, not someone.

What was Wei Wuxian at that point? Was he more like the dead than the living?

Su She was in awe of his power. One night, one song, and Wei Wuxian killed so many. No wonder Jin Guangshan coveted the amulet. No wonder Jin Guangyao had to use such dubious methods to kill Wei Wuxian.

If their plan still was to kill them. Su She would remove the curse as soon as it wouldn’t cast more suspicion on Jin Guangyao. This, the slow reveal that Jin Zixun was trash and everyone else applauded him for being trash, was much better than a painful death that would have ended up being told as a heroic story.

Maybe Wei Wuxian would give him a fitting end when he returned.

**“Gongzi,” A Lan disciple reported, “All have been checked. They all died in different ways and a woman hanged herself inside a room.”**

**“A woman?” Jiang Cheng asked.**

**“Yes.”**

**Jiang Cheng ran inside. With a final look around, Lan Wangji followed.**

**Jiang Cheng found Wang Lingjiao’s corpse. His expression filled with rage, Zidian activated, and he struck her body down.**

It was impressive.

Jin Guangshan couldn’t do much to counter that, if Wei Wuxian decided to attack.

But he had yet to kill anybody in over a year. There were rumors, but he knew the truth. Watching all this only further proved Wei Wuxian only acted when provoked.

He wondered what else counted as provocation. Did he only respond with deadly force when deadly force was already present? Was he the type to take preventative measures if he could be convinced an imminent threat existed?



Surely he wouldn't stand for any risk to A-Li.

**Lan Wangji waited outside the room, examining the talisman. When Jiang Cheng returned, he said, "Additional strokes."**

**Jiang Cheng took it, "You're right. It has additional strokes."**

**"This talisman was reversed," Lan Wangji deduced.**

**"Reversed?" Jiang Cheng wondered, "What does it mean?"**

**"Normal talismans ward off evil spirits," Lan Wangji looked towards the wall, lined with talismans, "This one summons evil spirits."**

**"Summons evil spirits?" Jiang Cheng echoed, alarmed, "Talismans can summon evil spirits? I've never heard of it."**

**"It's exactly unusual," Lan Wangji replied, "But according to the situation here, this talisman does have the reversed function."**

**"Only by adding several strokes," Jiang Cheng observed, "The function was totally reversed. Was this done by a person?"**

**"We can see four strokes added," Lan Wangji turned towards him, "Judging by the smell, they were painted with human blood. All the talismans inside this supervisory office have been altered. The style of writing is from the same person."**

**"Who could it be?" Jiang Cheng asked, "Among the Sects, no one is known for such an ability." Lan Wangji looked away, "But whoever it is, it's not a problem if we have the same goal."**

**"You didn't think of Wei Wuxian?" Lianfeng-Zun asked.**

**"Have any of his other talismans looked like that?" Jiang Wanyin snapped back.**

**"I thought it might be him," Lan Wangji admitted, his hand curling into a fist.**

**He just hoped it wasn't.**

He had reacted to Wei Ying's reappearance badly. It was reckless of Jiang Wanyin to treat his demonic cultivation as advantageous. He just hadn't understood. He thought Wei Ying chose to corrupt himself. He thought his love was too lost in potential power, in his need for revenge, to see how it had changed him.

Lan Wangji hadn't known it wasn't a choice. He should have.

He should have supported him.

At least Jiang Wanyin protected him somewhat back then. If they'd both been against him, maybe Wei Ying wouldn't have come back with them.

**“Zongzhu,” A Jiang disciple came up the stairs, “There is a survivor in the dungeon.”**

**Jiang Cheng’s eyes widened, then he went running again.**

**He arrived right in time to see his own disciples demanding Wen Qing stand.**

**“Stop!” Jiang Cheng ordered.**

**“Jiang-zongzhu,” The Jiang disciple bowed.**

**Wen Qing pushed herself up and met his gaze. Jiang Cheng drew his sword and cut her free of her chains. He looked her up and down, noting how she held her wrist to hide the bruise from the manacle. She kept her head down.**

**“That’s how you met again?” Nie Huaisang asked.**

**Jiang Cheng grimaced.**

**“It’s so romantic of you, Jiang-xiong,” The menace continued in a too happy voice.**

**He supposed it could be viewed as romantic. He heard woman and Yiling and immediately thought of Wen Qing. He’d half worried he’d find her hanging the first time he went running. His relief that it was Wang Lingjiao quickly gave way to anger. Then he was informed of another woman, this one alive...**

**So he ran.**

**He fought back a blush as others echoed Nie Huaisang.**

**“It was very heroic,” Wen Qing whispered.**

**“Don’t mention it,” He muttered.**

**Really. He didn’t want them to focus on Wei Wuxian hunting down the Wens, but he hadn’t realized what this looked like at the time.**

**“I never thought,” Jiang Cheng started, “We would see each other again.” Her hands trembled, “What did they do to you?”**

**She didn’t answer, just gasped at the sight of Suibian, “Where...where is he?”**

**“This is what we grabbed not long ago when Lan Wangji and I attacked Qishan,” Jiang Cheng stared forward.**

**She looked to the side sadly, “Right. At that time, you were deprived of your swords.”**

**“That is to say, you don’t know where he is either,” Jiang Cheng presumed, then turned around, fighting to maintain his composure, “Wen-guniang, I don’t know how long you’ve been confined here, but now the situation is clear. The four major Sects have**

**allied to bring down the Wen Sect. Wen Ruohan and the QishanWen, are doomed to fail.”**

**“Although there is deep hatred between me and the Wen Sect,” Jiang Cheng continued, “You...have saved me after all. If you are willing to leave the Wen Sect, I...”**

“Oh, A-Cheng,” Jiang Yanli sighed.

Lan Xichen felt himself let out a sigh as well. Jiang Wanyin always made himself seem so stern. It was easy to forget how young he was. He was a passionate man forced to restrain himself constantly. His formative years he fashioned himself as a contrast to Wei Wuxian. Then he’d had to be overly conscious of his actions because Wei Wuxian appeared to be thoughtless.

He should have offered to be his friend, or at least to help him more.

They would be brothers in a way, once Wangji and Wei Wuxian got officially married.

They would even share a nephew. If the way Jiang Wanyin acted around the rest of his family was any indication, he would be a very involved uncle.

It would be unfair to him to reach out now though. Jiang Wanyin spent a lot of his life feeling like was second best to Wei Wuxian. He had barely come into his own as Sect Leader. Lan Xichen didn’t know how he could form a close friendship with him without him feeling like he was a replacement for Da-ge and A-Yao.

But Da-ge could still die in a matter of years and A-Yao...he couldn’t continue to depend on him as he had in the past.

Wangji had Wei Wuxian to take care of, and A-Yuan. He would do his best to be there for him, but Lan Xichen couldn’t take time away from those who needed it more. Wei Wuxian had an entire cultivation to rebuild, a body to wean off resentment.

Jiang Wanyin needed friends, and so did Lan Xichen.

It would just be...difficult.

After all, Jiang Wanyin couldn’t look the woman he loved in the eyes when he was asking her to abandon her Sect and let him protect her.

**“A-Ning,” Wen Qing reminded him, “A-Ning was taken away by them. He’s still in Qishan.”**

**“Wen Qing,” Jiang Cheng turned back towards her, “Leave the Wen Sect. I...I can...”**

**“Jiang-zongzhu,” Wen Qing interrupted, “What can you do?” This time she turned away to keep her composure, “After all, I am a member of the Wen Clan. I have my brother and my family to look after. You can save me, but you can’t save them all.”**

**Their eyes met when she turned again, “Jiang-zongzhu, thank you for saving me. We have saved each other once. We are even now.” She bowed her head, then made to leave.**

**“Wen-guniang,” Jiang Cheng called after her, and she froze. He moved closer, pulling out a cloth from inside his robes. Inside the cloth was the comb, “Wen-guniang, take this comb. If anything happens to you in the future, come to me, and I will help you again.”**

**She didn’t move to take it, and his hand clenched around it before he set it on the table.**

**Jiang Cheng left.**

**Wen Qing watched him leave. Then she picked up the comb.**

**“Why didn’t you go to him?”**

Wen Qing squeezed Jiang Wanyin’s hand. They’d already had this conversation before.

“Because Jiang-zongzhu wouldn’t have threatened my nephew and killed guards to free her people,” Jin Guangshan said mildly.

“That depends,” Jiang Wanyin replied, “Would Jin Zixun have refused to answer me?”

A Sect Leader? He might have dared anyway. Jin Zixun was arrogant. He was also a coward, so if Jiang Wanyin could inspire half the fear Wei Wuxian had, then he would answer the demand.

“As for the killing,” Jiang Wanyin stared forward, “That would depend on what I found at Qiongqi. Perhaps the surviving guards should consider themselves lucky Wei Wuxian ran into Wen Qing before she found me.”

It was a deception. Wen Qing always planned to go to Wei Wuxian. It was less cruel to ask him to oppose the cultivation world. She knew that he was on a clock once the war was over. There was only so long he could continue to use demonic cultivation before someone tried to force him to take up the sword. He needed a way to keep his secrets.

Any doubt she had about asking Jiang Wanyin disappeared when Wei Wuxian found her on the street.

**Lan Wangji waited for him at the entrance, “Let’s go.”**

**“Where?” Jiang Cheng asked.**

**“Qishan,” Lan Wangji answered.**

**“You mean that Wen Zhuliu has taken Wen Chao to run away?”**

**Lan Wangji nodded.**

**“Then, there’s no use in staying in this abandoned office. How about we use our swords to chase them?” Jiang Cheng suggested.**

**“Agreed.”**

**Still, Jiang Cheng hesitated to leave. Ultimately, he decided to.**

Lan Qiren felt something unravel in his heart.

It was nice to see someone choose familial love over romantic love. It was nice to see Jiang Wanyin choose to continue his search for Wei Wuxian rather than start a new fight for Wen Qing. It almost made him jealous that his own brother didn’t choose the same.

He wondered if his brother had hesitated.

There was always the chance it was his desire for revenge warring with his love. Still, Wen Chao was both the reason the Jiang Sect burned and also the one most likely to know where Wei Wuxian was.

Still, he hadn’t realized the hurt he was carrying. He’d pushed it all aside to raise his nephews, knowing it affected their upbringing but never quite realizing how much his brother’s foolishness changed him. He thought himself a fair man, yet he’d misjudged Wei Wuxian out of misguided beliefs about his upbringing and personality.

He thought himself wise and clear-sighted, yet both those words better fit Wangji.

Perhaps it was time for him to step back more from the management of the Lan Sect.

**There was daylight when they found more corpses.**

**“Look at his clothes, he must have a high rank,” Jiang Cheng observed, “Was he killed by that person too?”**

**“He bled from all the holes in his head,” Lan Wangji said, “It should be the same person.”**

**“We tracked Wen Chao all this way, but this person is always one step ahead,” Jiang Cheng frowned, “Who could it be?”**

**“This person has strong demonic cultivation,” Lan Wangji met his gaze, “We should be careful.”**

**“Demonic?” Jiang Cheng repeated, “Is there anything more demonic than the Wen Sect? He’s not an enemy as long as we have the same goal. Let’s go, we need to hurry up.”**

**“Jiang-zongzhu,” A Jiang disciple ran up, “We have received news that someone has spotted Wen Zhuliu’s tracks near the Yunmeng courier station.”**

**“Why didn’t Wen Chao return to Qishan, but to Yunmeng?” Jiang Cheng wondered.**

**“Let’s go,” Lan Wangji suggested.**

“But seriously, why go to Yunmeng?” Nie Huaisang turned to San-ge.

San-ge put on a tight-lipped smile, “I was in Qishan.”

“I did wonder...” Nie Huaisang trailed off.

“You stood between Wen Zhuliu and Chifeng-Zun. You took his sword to the gut,” Jiang Cheng finished for him, “He saw the depths of your loyalty.” He managed to say the word without sneering, because they all knew now how little that word meant when San-ge was involved, “Did he try to oppose your position?”

“Wen Zhuliu never trusted me,” San-ge answered, “Wen Ruohan liked to think the cultivation world was full of hypocrites. That if he wasn’t the one to seize power, others would, so his rise to power was just. The idea that I saved Da-ge’s life, then was cast out anyways ended up working in my favor.”

Probably killing a Nie Sect Captain came in handy too.

“Then Wen Xu died and there was a void. Wen Chao wasn’t competent enough to fill it...” San-ge trailed off.

“So you saw the opportunity and took it,” Jin Zixuan completed this time.

With his false (?) hatred of Da-ge and Wen Ruohan’s very real hatred of Da-ge, it would be easy for San-ge to get closer.

Nie Huaisang sat up straighter. San-ge knew the Unclean Realm, but that’s where Wen Xu died so if he did help the Wen Sect there it hadn’t led anywhere. However, he did know Da-ge better than most people. Did he guess the assassination attempt? Did he turn Wen Ruohan’s focus on Da-ge and the Nie Sect, leading to their capture?

Wen Ruohan didn’t come out of his palace until Wei Wuxian used the Amulet. Before then, he was focused on torturing Da-ge. Was that planned? Was Da-ge an acceptable sacrifice if it meant Er-ge could make it into Qishan?

What was planned and how much control did San-ge have in planning it?

**That night, they arrived at the building. They spotted Wen Zhuliu entering.**

**Jiang Cheng moved to go after him, but Lan Wangji stuck his arm out, “Don’t be rash. Let’s observe first before we find Wen Chao.”**

**The two of them took to the roof, and made a hole so they could see into the room. Wen Zhuliu helped Wen Chao to the table. Wen Chao’s hands were bleeding, and he knocked over the candle, “It will become worse if we are discovered.”**

**Wen Zhuliu continued to take out medicine, “Do you think that we won’t be spotted in the dark?”**

**“Zhuliu, don’t you think we can escape? Since we have run so early and so far away?” Wen Chao asked.**

**Wen Zhuliu set down the medicine, “Maybe.”**

**“What do you mean ‘maybe’?” Wen Chao demanded, “We should continue running if it’s only a ‘maybe’.” He grasped Wen Zhuliu’s arm.**

**“Stay still,” Wen Zhuliu warned, “I need to apply some medicine or you will die.”**

**Wen Chao removed the hood. All his hair had been ripped out. His scalp and face were all bleeding from where he had clawed at himself. Wen Zhuliu had to force him to be still as he applied the medicine, warning him of how crying would only make things worse.**

Qin Su flinched away from the bloody sight.

Luo Qingyang grabbed her arm.

“He looks terrible,” Qin Su took calming breaths, then turned back to the sight.

“He never looked good to begin with,” Luo Qingyang smiled.

Right. Terrible person. He deserved this. She couldn’t remember Wen Chao all that clearly, but she was sure he had a full head of hair. He likely also had skin that wasn’t torn to shred by his own fingers.

“He got what was coming to him,” Luo Qingyang continued.

This was war? She thought they were better people than the enemy and that was why they won. She hadn’t seen what the Wen had done, so maybe it was equally horrible, but it didn’t feel right that everyone was sinking to such depths.

It was also looking more likely that the Jin Sect did terrible things to their prisoners.

They were Wens too after all, and if this was the disregard there was for Wen lives...

**A window opened and a wind blew out the candles.**

**“The flute,” Wen Chao cowered, “The flute. Is he playing the flute?”**

**“No,” Wen Zhuliu bent down to help him, “It’s the sound of the wind.” He coaxed him back to the table, “Come and eat something. Eat and we can hurry on our journey.”**

**“I want my father,” Wen Chao demanded, “When can we find my father?”**

**“At this speed,” Wen Zhuliu paused, “We have two days to go.”**

**“Two days?” Wen Chao repeated, then got angry, “Look at my terrible face. How can you ask me to wait for another two days? My father has kept you for what? You’re**

**useless! You good-for-nothing! Go and kill him now! Go! You piece of junk!” Wen Zhuliu got up, and immediately he changed his tune, “No. I was wrong. I’m sorry. I was wrong.”**

“Pathetic,” Sect Leader Ouyang scoffed.

“Do you think you could withstand Wei Wuxian’s anger?” Sect Leader Qin wondered.

The question did little to dissuade the scorn around the room.

Though a few took it to heart. They couldn’t withstand Wei Wuxian’s anger.

But none of them had nearly destroyed his Sect, forced him to give up his golden core, and then thrown him into the Burial Mounds.

Alright, so they had all but exiled him to the Burial Mounds, but surely it wasn’t as bad this time as it was the first? He was a true master of his craft now, not some beginner who only thought of demonic cultivation in theory. Wen Qing didn’t look that worse off, but she did have a golden core to help her out there.

Was Wei Wuxian angry with them? Or was this all just for Wen Chao?

**“Save me,” He begged, “I’ll recognize you as my big brother. You are like my brother from now on.”**

**“No need,” The door opened down below.**

**Wei Wuxian walked in unhurriedly. He had his flute grasped in one hand behind his back. He made his way up the stairs, uncaring if he made noise. He met Wen Zhuliu.**

“Why didn’t he target Wen Zhuliu?” Jin Zixuan asked.

He didn’t want to admit that seeing Wei Wuxian like this scared him. There was a cruelty in his eyes that didn’t belong to someone raised by A-Li. He should smile and act childishly. He didn’t think he’d miss the sound of his annoying voice taunting their enemies, but he’d prefer that to the sound of his flute.

“Maybe his cultivation doesn’t affect stronger cultivators as much?” Nie Huaisang guessed.

“Maybe he recognized a tool when one was being used in front of him,” Guangyao offered.

Chifeng-Zun scoffed, “Did he think he could appeal to Wen Zhuliu’s morality?”

“Why not?” Wen Qing challenged, “He never did more than he was ordered to.”

“He still...” Jin Zixuan trailed off. He still did what was ordered of him, even when it was wrong.

Just like Guangyao.



“Everyone was terrified of Zhou Zhuliu,” Wen Qing continued, “His special talent was melting cores. Do you know how many tried to kill him purely because of that? He wouldn’t have survived without a major Sect’s support, and the Wen Sect offered first.”

He couldn’t find the words to respond. He knew firsthand how serious life debts were. He owed Wei Wuxian for the Indoctrination Camp, so he protected A-Li when she was brought to Lanling.

Part of why he managed to get any Jin disciples was because A-Li insisted on joining her brothers and his mother insisted on sending a large force to see her to Qinghe. Of course, seeing all the dead bodies along the way ensured their decision to fight.

**Jiang Cheng reached back for Suibian.**

**Lan Wangji couldn’t look away.**

**“At this moment,” Wei Wuxian started, “Do you still believe it’s useful to call his name?” Wen Zhuliu moved closer, so he spoke to him, “Wen Zhuliu. Do you really believe that you can save his cheap life from me?”**

**“I will try with my life,” Wen Zhuliu vowed.**

**“Such a loyal dog!” Wei Wuxian mocked.**

**“I have to repay His Excellency,” Wen Zhuliu said, “For the kindness of promotion.”**

**“What a joke!” Wei Wuxian sneered, “Why do other people have to pay for your gratitude to Wen Ruohan?”**

Why indeed?

Jiang Yanli shook her head. Just like A-Xian, Wen Zhuliu had a power everyone feared and no one could replicate. There was a reason he was known as Core-Melting Hand, known for his skill alone rather than any deed he’d done with it. He did use it on anyone the Wen Sect told him to without question.

Questioning would have gotten him thrown out or killed. Likely the latter because of how dangerous he was.

However, there was always a choice. Following orders didn’t make him innocent.

**With that, Wei Wuxian lifted his flute and began to play. Wen Chao immediately scrambled back as resentment poured from the instrument.**

**Lan Wangji sealed the hole so they wouldn’t be affected.**

**A spirit answered his call. It was a young woman in her wedding robes. She attacked Wen Chao. Wen Zhuliu intervened, only to be clawed repeatedly by her nails. It wasn’t a fight he could win, as she wasn’t tangible, but he did force her to retreat.**

**Wen Zhuliu turned his attack on Wei Wuxian with a shout.**

Or maybe this was the plan all along.

Wen Zhuliu could defeat any enemy because he could crush the source of their power. He caused the Violet Spider's death.

What could be more terrifying to such a powerful man than to find that power ineffective? Maybe he didn't need to be terrorized by ghosts. After all, he wasn't the one who decided they needed to die. It was much more fitting to have him experience the same terror as his enemies.

Powerlessness.

For that's what would have happened if he struck Wei Wuxian. His attack would do nothing. Wei Wuxian would smile and continue where all previous opponents cried.

Wen Zhuliu was still a capable fighter without his signature move, but it had to be terrifying. To suddenly go from fighting until he could land one strike to having to fight until his opponent was all the way down...it was different. No one wanted to have to change their style midway through a fight to the death.

**That was when Lan Wangji decided to act. He broke through the ceiling, making Jiang Cheng fall.**

**Jiang Cheng immediately used Zidian to wrap around Wen Zhuliu's throat. He pulled him up to hang him while Lan Wangji landed protectively in front of Wei Wuxian.**

**They watched Wen Zhuliu run out of air, then die.**

**Jiang Cheng released him, then looked at his brother.**

A quick death, but one that answered a major question.

What was more important to Jiang Wanyin, revenge or his brother?

Wen Zhuliu melted his core. Jiang Wanyin could have demanded a rematch. He could have given him a slower death, matched him pain for pain. Instead, he saw a threat to Wei Wuxian and responded to it. As soon as the threat was dealt with, he turned his attention back to Wei Wuxian.

Though it was notable that Lan Wangji placed himself between Wei Wuxian and Wen Zhuliu.

It was unlikely he ever would have been hit, but that he'd risk it...

They really would do incredible acts for each other.

**There was a long silence.**

**Jiang Cheng took Suibian and threw it, “Your sword.”**

**Wei Wuxian smiled slightly, “Thanks.”**

**“You prick,” Jiang Cheng drew closer, “Where have you been for the last three months?” He punched Wei Wuxian on the chest.**

**Wei Wuxian laughed, “It’s a long story.” He looked down, “It’s a long story.”**

**Then Jiang Cheng pulled him into a hug. Wei Wuxian’s hands were occupied, but the one with Chenqing came up to return it.**

**Jiang Cheng pulled back, “We made a deal to meet at the town at the foot of the hill, right? I waited for you for five days, but not a soul came. I was so worried for three months. The other day, Lan-er-gongzi and I raided the Indoctrination Bureau. They said you were cast into the Burial Mounds.”**

Jiang Cheng elbowed Nie Huaisang for cooing at the hug.

This was where the lies got worse.

He should have known something was off when he didn’t return the hug enthusiastically. He should have demanded clear answers. He shouldn’t have just deemed him alright because he was upright and fighting. He should have dragged him to a healer and gotten the truth. He should have sat his traumatized ass in a healer's tent for a little bit, victory be damned.

“You were so relieved to see him alive you didn’t take in the state of him,” Wen Qing whispered.

Jiang Cheng was happy she understood. He’d been worried the idiot was dead.

He’d been so relieved that he was alive to continue worrying so much if he was alright.

That worry came back in full force, but for all the merits he’d earned giving Wen Zhuliu a quick death to get to Wei Wuxian faster, he knew he’d lose going forward.

Instead of getting Wei Wuxian to safety, he wasted time torturing Wen Chao.

Instead of letting him recover, he passively let him use demonic cultivation so they could win the war. He truly was more of a Sect Leader than a brother.

**Wei Wuxian huffed, then went and sat on the table, “If I had been cast into the Burial Mounds, how come I’m here now?”**

**“That’s right,” Jiang Cheng said, “Nobody can survive that place. Then where did they take you? Yiling or Nightless City? And how did you get out? And...how did you change into this look?”**

**“Really?” Wei Wuxian asked back, “Have I changed?”**

Yes and no.

Who could go through what he did without changing?

But he hadn't stopped being a good person yet.

**“No,” Jiang Cheng replied, “Not exactly. But where on earth have you been? The other night, Lan-er-gongzi and I were about to assault Wen Zhuliu, but someone acted faster. I never thought that it was you. It's you who also changed the talismans.”**

**“If I say that, when I was fleeing, I entered a cave where there was a rare book that a seclusive master left, and I learned it to gain an invincible power,” Wei Wuxian drawled, getting an eye roll from Jiang Cheng, “Would you believe me?”**

**“Come on,” Jiang Cheng scolded, “You've read too many stories. There aren't any seclusive masters or rare books in real life.”**

**Wei Wuxian grinned, then whined, “See, you don't believe it even if I had told you. As for the rest, I will tell you after we go back.”**

**“Fine,” Jiang Cheng relented, “Let's talk about this later.” He smiled, “It's good that you're back.”**

“Later never came, did it?” Xichen asked.

Jiang Yanli bowed her head, “We should have pressed. Maybe if we did...”

“You would have just gotten more evasions and lies,” Huaisang gave him a pointed look, “He wouldn't have upset you with the truth when you couldn't change it.”

Nie Mingjue wasn't going to give up his saber overnight. Huaisang had forced him into a corner. Otherwise he'd never have been so cruel as to tell Xichen the truth. It had never been his intention to force his best friend to watch him knowingly cultivate to his death.

Huaisang had needed to know because he would be the next Nie Sect Leader.

His situation was changeable. He didn't have to die.

“How silly,” Lady Qin sighed, “No one can go through life alone in their burdens.”

“They keep trying though,” Lady Luo rolled her eyes, “It's like they love torturing themselves.”

“It's not like we plan to experience pain,” Jin Guangyao also looked at him, “Sometimes we can't change the path we're on.”

Oh great, so Jin Guangyao would support him if he decided to continue cultivating and die young? Or was this some reverse psychology and he was hoping his veiled support would make him change his mind.

“If you can’t change the path, then simply stop walking,” Lady Luo shrugged.

That was her advice again. She was the one to leave her Sect of her own free will. Maybe that was why Huaisang sat her next to him. She hadn’t given up her cultivation, but she’d basically given up everything else because it was the right thing to do for her.

What was the right thing to do for him?

**Another silence, then Jiang Cheng shoved him and sat down next to him, “Why didn’t you return sooner?”**

**“I just got out not long ago,” Wei Wuxian answered, “I heard that you and Shijie are alright. You are busy rebuilding the YunmengJiang while fighting the war with allies.” He patted his knee, “Thank you for your effort in these three months.”**

**“Take your sword,” Jiang Cheng huffed, “I was waiting for you to take it back. I don’t want to be ambushed with questions about why I carry two swords every day.”**

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji finally stepped closer.**

**Wei Wuxian took a deep breath, then stood, “Lan-er-gongzi, no.” He met his gaze and narrowed his eyes, “I should call you Hanguang-Jun.” He bowed shallowly.**

This was an act.

Wei Ying cared for him. But where he could dance around Jiang Wanyin’s questions until he got frustrated and gave up, Lan Wangji required a different approach.

His brother grabbed his arm, “I wish you could have had a better reunion.”

Lan Wangji agreed. Maybe he should have just done what Jiang Wanyin did. Rather than depend on words to convey his confusion and fear, he should have just wrapped him in an embrace. Let him know that he was worried, that him being alive was a relief beyond words.

But he’d seen the ghost respond to his music. He could only sense darkness where there used to be light.

Wei Ying provoked him and got him to leave when all he’d wanted to do was stay.

**“The person who hunted down Wen Sect disciples along the way...was that you?” Lan Wangji demanded.**

**“So what if it was me?” Wei Wuxian asked back.**

**Jiang Cheng stood, “It’s also you who changed those talismans?”**

**Wei Wuxian turned away.**

**“So you killed them?” Lan Wangji pressed.**

**“Lan-er-gongzi, what do you mean?” Jiang Cheng asked, while Wei Wuxian just forced a smile.**

**“Why did you give up the sword?” Lan Wangji ignored him, “For something else?”**

**Wei Wuxian just kept avoiding looking at him.**

**“Answer me,” Lan Wangji ordered.**

The righteous Hanguang-Jun.

Of course he wouldn't ignore Wei Wuxian's changes.

Of course their relationship would change from here. They no longer matched after all. How could they be soulmates when Wei Wuxian had given up a piece of his soul to his brother, and left behind more to get out of the Burial Mounds?

If they'd been unequal before, the gap between them now was insurmountable.

**Wei Wuxian finally faced him again, “What if I refuse to answer?”**

**Lan Wangji moved towards him, but stopped at a step when Wei Wuxian stepped back.**

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian said, “We have just reunited after such a long time. Confronting me with so many questions is not proper.” Lan Wangji continued to glare, “It has been months since we split up at the Xuanwu Cave. Even if you don't cherish our relationship as classmates, you shouldn't be so ruthless.”**

**“Answer me,” Lan Wangji repeated.**

**“I already did, but you don't believe it,” Wei Wuxian evaded, “I can't explain it in just a few words.”**

He really couldn't.

They had all watched what had happened between the Xuanwu Cave and the death of Wen Zhuliu. It wasn't a story that could be condensed without missing key details.

**“Why couldn't he answer just the simplest question?”**

**“Would it have changed anything? If there were one detail less, would we be as understanding?”**

Just the massacre of Lotus Pier wasn't enough to explain his actions.

Neither was giving up his golden core, which he would have taken to his grave.

It took the revelation of his time in the Burial Mounds for everyone to agree that he should be rehabilitated, not killed. And that was only if Qiongqi Pass was as out of his control as everything else in his life.

There was still the chance that he wasn't skilled enough to control his new power.

With every new scene, the likelihood of that decreased. Leaving only that the Jin Sect had committed a crime.

Not many were willing to consider that yet. It was much easier for them if everything was conveniently Wei Wuxian's fault.

**"Then return to Gusu with me and explain it clearly," Lan Wangji demanded.**

**"Gusu?" Wei Wuxian scoffed, "The place with more than three thousand rules?" He shook his head, "I refuse to go. I prefer Yunmeng."**

**"Wei Ying, don't joke around," Lan Wangji insisted.**

**Jiang Cheng stopped him from getting closer, "Lan-er-gongzi."**

**Wei Wuxian lifted Chenqing between them. He looked at the flute, "Lan Zhan," His gaze drifted to the person, "What do you really want?"**

**"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan answered, "There will be a price for what you're doing." Wei Wuxian smirked, "There's no exception throughout history. Demonic cultivation harms your body and your temperament more."**

**"Demonic cultivation?" Wei Wuxian echoed, moving away and twirling the flute, "Lan-er-gongzi, I didn't steal anyone's spirit. How can it be taken as unorthodox? What I use are talismans. What I practice is music. Can those be taken as unorthodox? Even if those are, I know myself, and I know whether it will hurt me or not."**

**"As for temperament," He continued, "I'm in charge of my own mind. I fully understand what I'm doing."**

Nie Huaisang bit his lip to refrain from speaking at such a pivotal moment.

Everything he was saying was twisted truths. He had found a cave. If he found the ghost of Xue Chonghai, then he even found a secluded (dead) master. He couldn't leave for three months, leading to him just having gotten out.

Wei Wuxian was doing demonic cultivation. He depended on the resentment of humans. Yet he didn't outright deny it here. He hadn't stolen anyone's spirit. The dead seemed happy to carry out his commands of vengeance. Talismans and music were accepted aids to cultivation.

He understood what he was doing. He understood he would make enemies by doing it. So he acted like this so no one would share in his downfall.

**"There are some things you can't decide on your own," Lan Wangji argued.**

**Wei Wuxian returned to his former place, "How do others know my temperament and why should it be their concern?"**

**“Wei Wuxian!” Lan Wangji raised his voice.**

**“Lan Wangji,” Wei Wuxian returned calmly, “Why do you choose to be at odds with me now? Who do you think you are? Who do the GusuLan think they are? You thought I wouldn’t protest?”**

“What did he think we would do to him?” Lan Xichen asked.

Huaisang laughed, “What was it Teacher Lan said? If he found a way to control resentful energy, the cultivation world would not allow his existence, right?” The young man tapped his closed fan to his hand, “Considering you beat us for drinking alcohol, I wouldn’t be surprised if he remembered those words as a death threat.”

Wangji inhaled sharply.

Uncle coughed, “We wouldn’t have executed him.”

“You’d have him purged of resentment, which for all we know could kill him,” Huaisang pointed out, “And even if he didn’t, what do you think he’d do to keep his secret once you insisted he pick up the sword again and it exhausted him?” He paused, “Or did you mean you wouldn’t have killed him because Hanguang-Jun loves him too much. If it were anyone else-”

“Huaisang,” Da-ge warned.

Lan Xichen had to admit it was true. If anyone else were a demonic cultivator, they would have been struck down a long time ago. Wei Wuxian was tolerated for a time because of his connection to Jiang Wanyin and Jiang Yanli. Without that, he did end up a public enemy that many wouldn’t have hesitated to kill on sight.

It was just luck no one had ever run into him in Yiling, or he left the Burial Mounds so rarely.

“I interpreted the invitation to Gusu as a threat as well,” Jiang Wanyin grimaced, “If not physical, then mental. Wei Wuxian was unwell, and I didn’t think the rigidity of the Lan would help him get better.”

The Lan Sect was known for righteousness because they were unbending.

Wangji asked Wei Wuxian to go to Gusu. Lan Xichen knew this was an admission of love. Lan Xichen knew if Wei Wuxian went to Gusu, he’d have been hidden from the world and the consequences of his actions.

Everyone else, including Wei Wuxian, heard a threat.

**“Lan-er-gongzi,” Jiang Cheng interjected, “The Wen Sect problem has yet to be solved, and we are in need of fighting resources. Why do you, the GusuLan, care so much now? With all due respect, even if he were to be called for an account, it shouldn’t be your business. He should follow anyone but you.”**



**At no point during his words did Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji look away from each other.**

It was heartbreaking to see.

They used to communicate so well with just a glance, but now they were both searching for something that wasn't there.

Wei Wuxian was no longer as willing to talk as he had been.

And Hanguang-Jun? He was hard to read when he was content. His anger hid everything else he was probably feeling in that moment.

**Wen Chao woke up and crawled towards them, "Jiang-gongzi, Lan-er-gongzi, I was wrong. I was wrong. Forgive me," He repeated.**

**Wei Wuxian kicked him away, "Lan-er-gongzi. It's a domestic affair of the YunmengJiang. Please leave it to us."**

**Lan Wangji stared at him, but Wei Wuxian didn't even spare him a glance. He slowly left.**

**Wei Wuxian turned as he descended the stairs, his cold expression dropping into one of sadness.**

**Wen Chao pleaded beneath him, "Forgive me. Forgive me."**

**Lan Wangji stood outside the building, and he could still hear the sounds of Wen Chao being tortured before he was killed.**

***"Lan Wangji, why do you choose to be at odds with me now?" Wei Wuxian's words echoed in his mind, "Who do you think you are? Who do the GusuLan think they are?"***

It was always what one couldn't see.

Jiang Yanli didn't notice Jin Zixuan hesitantly reaching for her at first. Even when she had, she hadn't responded in a way that was obvious to Jin Zixuan that she felt as she did.

Jiang Cheng couldn't look at Wen Qing when he asked her to go with him. Wen Qing couldn't look at him when she rejected him.

Wei Wuxian kept up his mask until Lan Wangji turned away. Lan Wangji didn't waver until he was well outside the building.

What would have changed if they could have just seen the other's face? Or would they never have found the strength to do what they needed to do if they just fell into each other's arms?

Me: Alright, let's write this chapter!

My brain: Start an SVSSS watch-the-series fic?

Me: Maybe later. Finish this first.

My brain: TGCF?

Me: No, and that is not a compromise.

My brain: New summary and title?

Me: ...possibly

I won't change the title unless someone recommends something good, but be ready for some tweaks to the summary and tags. I'm quite terrible at summaries, if you couldn't tell. I'm always happy people seem to give it a shot anyways!

# Everything That You Thought I Would Be

## Chapter Summary

Has fallen apart, right in front of you

## Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Numb by Linkin Park

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was as expected.

Hanguang-Jun and Wei Wuxian were at odds now that he was a demonic cultivator.

They'd just been wrong about the reasons. They thought Hanguang-Jun was against him because of his righteousness. They hadn't realized he was angry because he was worried. The man he loved was obviously hurting and trying to push them away and Hanguang-Jun didn't know what to do.

His actions were misinterpreted and he didn't depend on his words.

What a tragic lack of communication!

**Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian went back to Yunmeng. They made their bows to Jiang Fengmian and Madam Yu's tablets.**

**Jiang Cheng rose first.**

**Wei Wuxian remained kneeling, "Jiang-shushu and Madam Yu," He whispered, "You asked me to take good care of Jiang Cheng and Shijie. I did it. Rest in peace now."**

He did protect them

It just cost him everything else.

"Did he think it was over then?" Jiang Cheng muttered.

Wei Wuxian made sure that Wen Chao didn't succeed in wiping out the Wen Sect. But even at this point, when Wen Ruohan had yet to be defeated and the cultivation world was in the

midst of a war...he already sounded so done with the Jiang Sect. Yes, he'd given up his core. Jiang Cheng still couldn't understand why.

If Wei Wuxian loved him so much, how could he stand to leave?

"From a certain point of view, all of his actions can be seen as protecting the Jiang Sect," Nie Huaisang replied, "Which is the same as protecting you."

"Who asked-" He bit off the question. They could all see who asked. His parents, who even in death managed to push Wei Wuxian to lower himself so they could walk over him.

"He doesn't have to be asked," Nie Huaisang huffed, "Older siblings do what they will. They don't care about how it affects us younger siblings."

"Huaisang," Chifeng-Zun sighed.

"Oh," Nie Huaisang tilted his head, "I suppose that was worded poorly. Older brothers do what they will. You older sisters here are doing wonderfully."

"Do you want to cause him a qi deviation?" Wen Qing hissed into her tea.

Nie Huaisang just scowled behind his fan.

Jiang Cheng snorted. Nie Huaisang really needed to be more direct about his anger. It was unfair to Chifeng-Zun, who had no such talent with words. And if they couldn't resolve whatever problem they had, what hope did he have of any resolution with Wei Wuxian?

**"What are you mumbling about?" Jiang Cheng demanded.**

**Wei Wuxian stood, "Nothing."**

**"So will you go to Qinghe with me to participate in the final battle of the Sunshot Campaign?" Jiang Cheng asked.**

**"You don't say!" Wei Wuxian punched his shoulder, "Why do you think I returned? What's more, Shijie is in Qinghe."**

**Jiang Cheng punched him back, "You finally said something decent."**

**They looked back at the shrine.**

**"Right," Wei Wuxian looked nervous, "How is Shijie? Is she still mad at me?"**

**"You'll see when you get there," Jiang Cheng smiled.**

Jiang Yanli shook her head.

She could never bring herself to be angry with A-Xian. How could she? Her mother had always been angry with him, and A-Cheng was always at least annoyed. As much as she wished to shout at him sometimes, to force him to explain, she knew she would never.

Everyone else was so quick to act in anger, they always acted before she did.

Maybe A-Xian would have responded to her anger. Maybe he would have answered her questions. Except he would have taken her anger as a sign that she didn't love him.

Anger was a secondary emotion. Anger came after hurt. Anger came after insult. Anger came from worry or annoyance. A-Xian wasn't good at telling where anger came from. He would always believe anger came from a dark place, jealousy or resentment.

So she could rarely get angry at him.

**When they arrived at Qinghe, they found the place flooded with the injured. Wei Wuxian scanned the crowd, quickly finding Jiang Yanli trying to calm a young man. He stood behind her and just watched her, before whispering, "Shijie."**

**Jiang Yanli froze, and slowly turned around. She rose, both their eyes becoming red-rimmed.**

**"XianXian," She whispered back.**

Jin Zixuan smiled at the memory of her.

There were still so many who underestimated what she did during the war. They praised those that fought while ignoring the actions of those who ensured they could keep fighting. If it weren't for A-Li and Nie Huaisang, he had no idea how the supply lines would have run. A-Li made sure the food and medicine went to good use and never ran low.

It couldn't have been an easy task keeping the merchants from price gouging, but Nie Huaisang somehow kept the major Sects from going bankrupt. It wasn't something he'd ever considered before.

Nor was it something anyone else in the room would consider, with their belief that Nie Huaisang and A-Li were somehow useless.

**The Yunmeng trio quickly made their way to their rooms, Jiang Yanli holding his arm the entire way, "Come." She led him inside and sat him down. She kept trying not to cry as she patted him down, "A-Xian, you got thinner."**

**"Shijie, you too," Wei Wuxian returned. He wiped away a stray tear.**

**"Where have you been?" Jiang Yanli asked softly.**

**Wei Wuxian averted his gaze, then leaned forward to hug her, "Shijie, it doesn't matter where I've been. I won't leave now. I promised that you, Jiang Cheng, and I will be together forever."**

**This caused her to start crying, "Yes," She agreed, "Together forever. Don't you ever disappear again, okay?"**

**"Never again," He promised.**

**She nodded, and he wiped another tear from her face.**

**Jiang Cheng smiled widely at both of them.**

It had been awhile since Jiang Wanyin smiled.

Lan Xichen thought it made him look younger. He should always smile like that. It suited him far better than his current discontented expression.

Then his gaze shifted to Huaisang, and he wondered if he was included in the older brothers who did what they would without a care for their younger brother's opinion. Probably. He and Da-ge just thought they knew their younger brothers. He could read Wangji better than anyone! He just hadn't realized how much time they'd spent apart.

What did it matter that he could read Wangji if he wasn't there to see it himself?

"Do you think Wei Ying was lying?" Wangji asked.

How would Lan Xichen know?

"He can lie surprisingly well when he wants to," A-Yao answered, "But in this instance, I think instead of forever he meant until death."

"And death would come soon with the way he acted," Uncle said.

Wei Wuxian changed so much, and it scared them because they didn't understand. He would have died before clearing up those misunderstandings.

No. A-Yao and Jin Guangshan would have killed him. Framed him for one crime or another, then had an army destroy him.

Lan Xichen forced his face into a neutral expression. Out of all the siblings here, he never once thought he'd lose his brother. There were a few close calls, but there was a reason he was Hanguang-Jun. The only thing that could take Wangji away was Wei Wuxian. Otherwise, the Twin Jades would never be separated.

**"Wei-xiong!" Nie Huaisang shouted before entering, giving all the siblings time to wipe their faces. The man then burst into the room, "Wei-xiong!" He looked the wrong way first, then located him, hurrying over, "Wei-xiong!" He knelt by his side, "Wei-xiong. I heard you came back. It's really you!" He beamed, "You're really-"**

**Nie Huaisang cut himself off. He'd tried to grab Wei Wuxian's shoulder, but his friend bodily flinched away. His expression fell.**

It was such a stark difference.

Wei Wuxian was a very tactile young man. With Nie Huaisang, who was equally as tactile, there was constant touching. An arm around the shoulders, a hand on an upper arm. Even the way they used to sit and stand leaned into each other.

Wei Wuxian barely returned Jiang Wanyin's hug. They'd thought it was due to the weapons in his hands.

Now, they wondered if touch itself had become unbearable.

Could one who adjusted to the company of the dead relearn how to be amongst the living?

**Wei Wuxian laughed, quickly pulling himself together to grab his hand, "Nie-xiong, long time no see."**

**Nie Huaisang laughed as well, "Wei-xiong, you've been missing for months. Everyone was desperately looking for you. Especially Lan-er-gongzi and Jiang-xiong. They almost--"**

**"That's enough," Jiang Cheng interrupted, grabbing his arm, "You're talking too much. Hurry, let's get out."**

**"Wait!" Nie Huaisang protested, "I'm not done yet. I'll tell you what," He talked as he was marched out, "I'm giving a banquet tonight. Everyone can come and have fun."**

"You should write a note," Lady Qin advised.

Nie Mingjue was torn from his moping. Huaisang's anger wasn't fading, and watching Wei Wuxian push Wangji away made him worry that he'd been doing the same thing. Not as suddenly, but it was fundamentally the same reasoning.

He didn't have long to live, and it was the kind thing to do to die alone.

Except he needed to make sure Huaisang was ready for his death. He started to back off so his brother was prepared to stand alone. It was cruel to the both of them, but he couldn't feel bad about it since he was the one doing it. He deserved all the harsh words Huaisang threw at him. He deserved the physical distance between them as well.

"A note?" Nie Mingjue repeated.

Lady Qin looked down, "Chifeng-Zun...does not seem to me a man talented in words." Lady Luo coughed to cover up a laugh, "A note means the words said are those you truly wish to say. It allows for less misunderstandings."

Nie Zhonghui passed a parchment up.

Nie Mingjue scowled, "And how am I supposed to get it to him?"

Lady Luo smirked, "Don't try to get out of it. I was a member of the Jin Sect."

Great. So not only would he be writing a note, which he didn't do even for Xichen. They wrote letters. Completely different. Now this note would be folded into a butterfly and flown across the room for everyone to whisper about.

Another of his disciples produced some ink and a brush.

What the hell was he supposed to write?

**Wei Wuxian laughed again, but it died when Jiang Yanli touched his hand, “A-Xian, I’ll go prepare your food. Just get some rest. Don’t exhaust yourself.”**

**Lan Wangji approached Wei Wuxian’s room. Through the open door, he saw Wei Wuxian examining Chenqing. His grip tightened on Bichen, and he didn’t get closer.**

**Lan Wangji didn’t go to the banquet either.**

It was a mistake to not go.

Lan Wangji realized it gave the completely wrong impression.

It only made Wei Ying look worse.

**“Jiang-zongzhu,” Nie Mingjue raised his cup, “Wei-gongzi could have made it back safe and sound. It’s really a fortune for our rebellion against the Wen.” Everyone raised their cups, “Everyone. Let’s toast to Wei-gongzi.”**

**“To Wei-gongzi,” Nie Huaisang repeated enthusiastically, echoed by all.**

**Wei Wuxian just stared at the empty spot where Lan Wangji should have sat.**

Lan Wangji didn’t think Wei Ying would miss his presence so much.

But of course he would. Wei Ying loved him. He took joy and comfort in his presence. Therefore, to be without him caused him misery and discomfort.

Everyone else saw his distraction as an insult. They thought his aloof attitude was one of arrogance, as though everyone else was not worth his attention. They thought Lan Wangji’s decision not to celebrate his return was proof Wei Ying was twisted.

Lan Wangji should have controlled himself better, apologized sooner.

If he’d stood by his side publicly earlier, it could have helped.

**“Wei Wuxian,” Jiang Cheng hissed, drawing him out of his moping.**

**“Pardon me,” Wei Wuxian lifted his cup.**

**“Wei-gongzi shows his respect,” Nie Huaisang covered for his lapse, “I’ll dry my glass then.”**

**“Dry it!” Jiang Cheng agreed.**

**They all drank.**

**“Wei-gongzi,” Nie Mingjue spoke first again, “Why didn’t you carry your sword today?”**



**Wei Wuxian fiddled with his flute, before smiling slightly, “I’m just not in the mood.”**

Did it hurt to be asked that question?

What else could it be but a reminder of the core he’d given up? Of the days he’d spent awake in a torturous surgery? Of his helplessness to find a way to help his brother?

Of course it had to hurt.

There was no way to answer that question in a less rude manner. If he claimed injury, he would have been seen by a healer. He certainly wouldn’t have been able to go to a battlefield until he could carry a sword again. Otherwise...there really was no acceptable excuse.

Not for someone of his strength and reputation.

**“As a disciple of a cultivation Sect,” Sect Leader Yao commented, “Carrying swords is a kind of honor. I know Wei-gongzi’s fame as an untamed character, but isn’t it a bit excessive to be so impertinent?”**

**Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli exchanged worried glances.**

**“Wei-gongzi’s renown in swordsmanship is well-known,” Jin Zixun commented next, “I expect to have a friendly match in such a rare case. However, you don’t have your sword. How regrettable that you can’t do me such a favor.”**

**Wei Wuxian just smiled again.**

**“Ah,” Nie Huaisang shifted nervously, “Wei-xiong. Why don’t you tell everyone how you killed Wen Chao?”**

**Wei Wuxian set down his cup, “An evil person naturally met his bad end.”**

**Nie Huaisang looked down, and Jiang Cheng looked away.**

Nie Huaisang tried. He covered for Wei Wuxian’s lapse in attention at the toast. Then he’d tried to divert everyone’s attention from Jin Zixun’s stupidity with a reminder that Wei Wuxian killed Wen Chao and Wen Zhuliu.

Was it his most subtle work? No, but usually Wei Wuxian was willing to work with him.

It scared him to see Wei Wuxian so...different. First the rejection of his touch, then his behavior at the banquet. Compared to the Wei Wuxian he’d celebrated with before Indoctrination, it was almost as though his friend had been replaced by another, completely different stranger.

**“I can’t believe such foolishness was happening under my roof!” Nie Huaisang complained, “Jiang-xiong, you should have told me they were having a lover’s quarrel.”**

**“What lovers?” Jiang Cheng huffed, “Hanguang-Jun threatened him.”**

Hanguang-Jun reached for his sword, only prevented from doing so by Er-ge.

“Rejected him,” Wen Qing corrected, “After Wei Wuxian provoked him.”

“Still ridiculous,” Nie Huaisang pouted, “Er-ge, you’re supposed to be sensible.”

“I wasn’t there yet,” Er-ge replied, “Though I’m unsure if I was helpful.”

“I should have just locked the two of them in a room,” He sighed.

Da-ge didn’t correct him. He was too busy writing something. A note to him? He didn’t want to hear from his brother unless he’d changed his mind.

He didn’t dare hope for that. It was probably just more of the same.

**“What does he mean by that?” Sect Leader Yao wondered.**

**“I heard Wen Chao suffered so much before he died,” Sect Leader Ouyang whispered, “That he might not be recognizable to his own father.”**

Qin Su frowned.

"Didn't Chifeng-Zun decapitate Wen Xu and hang his head in the entryway?" She whispered to Luo Qingyang.

"That was different," Luo Qingyang dismissed.

"How?" Qin Su wondered.

"Because I did it," Chifeng-Zun said with a grimace.

He too must have realized how unfair this all sounded. How could one cruel act be lauded and another scorned?

**“I also heard that Wei-gongzi learned some strange techniques,” Another added, “His talismans even reveal some kind of viciousness.”**

**“Maybe he learned some lousy tricks,” Sect Leader Yao mused.**

**Wei Wuxian just drank more. He tilted his head as he heard Lan Wangji’s playing in the distance.**

**“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli brought him back.**

**“What?”**

**“Where is Lan-er-gongzi?” She asked.**

**Wei Wuxian looked away, “I don’t know.”**

**“Haven’t you two been getting along well?” She pressed.**

**He smiled bitterly, “Is that so?” Then he took another drink.**

Wei Wuxian really was drinking a lot.

Was it to hide the fact he wasn’t eating? There couldn’t have been much to eat in the Burial Mounds. He probably didn’t stop to eat once he got out.

A starved person couldn’t just go back to eating banquets. Just like Wen Qing only sat with her small bowl of broth. It was just another thing he couldn’t explain, like his lack of sword and his demonic cultivation. With a sister like Jiang Yanli, if he didn’t eat she would force food upon him. If he got sick, he still couldn’t afford a trip to the healers.

So he drank to give the appearance of normality.

A few thought more about what he could eat in the Burial Mounds, before dismissing such thoughts.

It wasn’t something anyone wanted to talk about.

**“Gentlemen,” Sect Leader Yao stood, “We are now a coalition of all Sects. We’ll eradicate the Wen Sect sooner or later. We’ll reduce them to nothing!”**

**Everyone toasted and drank again.**

**Wei Wuxian just took his wine and left.**

**Sect Leader Yao huffed and sat down.**

**Everyone looked worried.**

**Wei Wuxian followed the music to Lan Wangji’s rooms. He could see his silhouette through the paper, but he didn’t make a move to enter. He just sat on one of the handrails and drank more.**

***“There will be a price for learning demonic cultivation,” Wei Wuxian recalled, “There are no exceptions throughout history. It will harm your body and your temperament more.”***

**Wei Wuxian shook his head, and drank more.**

It really was ridiculous.

And because it was so ridiculous, it was easy to convince others of lies.

Jin Guangyao was still worried about what would be shown of his actions during the war. Da-ge was distracted writing something, which meant he couldn’t be that angry. Still, they had agreed to a ceasefire between them. That wouldn’t stop Huaisang from seeking revenge, or just convincing Jin Zixuan that his life wasn’t worth preserving-

“Do you think he remembers everything people say to him?” Er-ge asked.

A strange question to ask, especially when they'd seen how poor Wei Wuxian's memory could be.

"When the people matter to him," Jin Guangyao answered, "Why? Did you say something?"

Er-ge just grimaced.

"You did," Hanguang-Jun narrowed his eyes.

"Then I'm sure he remembers it," Jin Guangyao fought back the urge to comfort him with falsehoods. After all, Er-ge was Zewu-Jun. He was respected by all. Wei Wuxian had to admire him, and thus listen to him when advice was offered, "What did you say to him?"

"Ah," Er-ge looked away, "I'm sure it will come up."

Well, it couldn't be worse than what others said to him. Though maybe it could. Wei Wuxian cared for only a few people's opinions of him. Not all words carried the same weight.

**Jiang Cheng found him there, and he approached slowly, "Why did you leave early?"**

**"Aren't you the same?" Wei Wuxian asked.**

**"I'm worried about you," Jiang Cheng said, "Why do you look so gloomy?"**

**"What do you think?" Wei Wuxian muttered.**

**Jiang Cheng almost smiled, "Is it because of Lan Wangji?" Wei Wuxian froze in the motion of raising the jar to his mouth, "Since that unhappy separation, he's been avoiding you." Wei Wuxian drank again, "Why did you come here to be disliked by him?"**

**Wei Wuxian smiled, then took a deep breath, "Maybe I'm just bored." He stood.**

Or maybe...

Jin Guangshan didn't want to believe it. Could Wei Wuxian truly be a cutsleeve? Could he have returned Hanguang-Jun's affections? Did he love him still?

Another love meant another weakness, but Hanguang-Jun...

Well, it wasn't much of a weakness.

**"Wei Wuxian," Jiang Cheng stopped him, "I found your sword for you. Why aren't you carrying it?"**

**"I said I wasn't in the mood," Wei Wuxian answered.**

**"You should carry your sword in public next time." Wei Wuxian looked away, but Jiang Cheng continued, "Or you'll present yourself as an example of rudeness. Come on. Let's go back."**

**“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian challenged, “You should know me by now. The more you want me to do something, the more I don’t want to. What can they do if I don’t carry my sword?” Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, “Besides...I don’t want to have a match with somebody I don’t know. My sword can’t return to its sheath without blood on it.”**

**“In case anyone would bother me with that again, I decided not to carry it to solve the problem for good,” Wei Wuxian lied, taking another drink.**

**“Didn’t you like to show off your swordsmanship?” Jiang Cheng worried.**

**“I was childish then,” Wei Wuxian looked down, “I can’t be childish all my life.” He smiled and patted him on the chest with his flute.**

There was a certain melancholy to seeing children grow up. It was inevitable. One couldn’t remain a child forever. All parents hoped to see their children reach adulthood.

Madam Jin looked out over the other Sect Leaders, the other authorities. They were all so young still. None could be considered children anymore. They’d lost the last vestiges of childhood during the war, and any remaining innocence couldn’t be allowed to remain when facing her husband.

It was a pity they were forced to grow up so quickly.

It was a greater pity that growing up meant being less happy.

Her gaze lingered on the bastard. Not everyone grew to be a better person. Some grew to be more vicious. She couldn’t wait to see his reappearance.

**Later that night, Wei Wuxian meditated.**

**When Jiang Yanli walked in, he lifted his flute as though she were a threat. She stopped in the doorway, “A-Xian. I saw the door open so I...”**

**Wei Wuxian seemed surprised by his own actions. He slowly lowered the flute, his face pale and clammy.**

**“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli drew closer, “What happened?”**

**“Shijie, it’s okay,” Wei Wuxian reassured her. His grip tightened on his flute.**

**“This flute...” Jiang Yanli followed his gaze, “I never saw you with it before.”**

**He lifted it up for her to look at better, but when she touched it the resentment lashed out at her. She drew back as though scalded.**

Everyone froze.

Wen Qing closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

If there was one person Wei Wuxian would never hurt, it was his sister. How could he ever harm the first person to love him?

If anyone still needed proof of how broken Wei Wuxian was, this was it. His instincts saw everyone as a threat. Even harmless, loving Jiang Yanli couldn't touch his spiritual tool without risk of backlash. What did that say about being around others? He hadn't been antisocial out of fear of discovery, but also out of fear for their safety.

"He couldn't control it," Chifeng-Zun was the first to comment.

"He couldn't control it completely," Jiang Wanyin corrected.

"In a place full of resentment, he didn't have to worry about containing it," Zewu-Jun reasoned, "In a place such as the Unclean Realm..."

Wen Qing wondered if it was harder to control there. Could he sense the resentment within the Nie Sect sabers? Or did he just think his own senses were skewed by the amount of resentment he carried within himself? This was without considering all the dead from the war. How could one tell how dirty they were if they bathed in murky water?

Zewu-Jun coughed to cover his hesitation, "Well, he had to be far more careful if he didn't want to injure anyone."

"More adjustments," Nie Huaisang commented, "And we all judged him for it."

"How were we supposed to know he'd gone through..." Jin Zixun lost his anger, "That?"

"How does anyone know what another is going through?" Nie Huaisang bit back.

"Indeed," Lan Qiren agreed, "We should all take more care to be unbiased until we know the situation."

Wen Qing took a sip of tea and savored the taste. It was more pleasant than listening to their hypocrisy.

**Wei Wuxian took her wrist, "Shijie, are you okay? Did it hurt you?"**

**Jiang Yanli shook her head, "I'm fine." Wei Wuxian hid the flute behind him, "So it recognizes you as its owner?"**

**"I happened to pick it up," Wei Wuxian replied.**

**"It's your first-class spiritual tool then," She smiled.**

**He brought it back out.**

**"Just like A-Niang's Zidian," Jiang Yanli continued, "A-Xian, what's its name?"**

**"I haven't figured it out," Wei Wuxian answered.**

**“It’s first-class,” Jiang Yanli half-scolded, “It deserves a name. Don’t slight it. Are you planning to call it Suibian just like your sword?”**

**Wei Wuxian smiled slightly, “Well...I want to call it Chenqing.”**

**“Chenqing?” Jiang Yanli repeated.**

**“Chenqing,” He confirmed.**

“I wished to set forth my thoughts and explain my actions,” MianMian recited, “I little dreamed this would be held a crime.”

“Is that where he got the name from?” Qin Su wondered, “Poetry?”

“I don’t know,” MianMian shrugged, “It certainly fits, doesn’t it?”

Wei Wuxian didn’t want the fate he’d resigned himself to. What he wanted most in the world was to be with Jiang Wanyin and Jiang Yanli. Possibly Hanguang-Jun too, but since he didn’t believe he could have that he pushed that desire down. All it took to avoid that fate was an explanation.

But he couldn’t. While it wasn’t a crime, he didn’t want to condemn Jiang Wanyin to a fate of knowing the core within himself wasn’t his. Jiang Wanyin struggled so much to make a name for himself. It would weigh on him forever that all his accomplishments were built on his brother’s core.

So not a crime, but not something Wei Wuxian would willingly do.

He just never thought Wen Qing would take that choice away from him.

MianMian could see why, of course. Wen Qing was an intelligent woman. She could see the future of herself and her people if they continued without an explanation. It wasn’t good. Jiang Wanyin could learn to live with this knowledge. The Wen Remnants could very well have died just so everyone could remain ignorant.

**Jiang Yanli nodded, then went back to bring in the soup, “A-Xian, I saw you didn’t eat much at the banquet. Have some soup.”**

**He set Chenqing down to eat, then saw her worry, “Shijie, what is it?”**

**“A-Xian,” She shook her head, “You’ve changed. During the past three months, where exactly have you been?”**

**He faked a smile, “Shijie, you worry too much.” He tried to make himself look cute.**

**“XianXian,” Jiang Yanli sighed, then caressed his cheek, “I’ve seen you grow up. You can hardly hide it in front of me, but what matters is your safe return. It’s most important that we three are together. As for other things, you can tell me when you want to. Deal?”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded.**

Nie Mingjue huffed.

When Wei Wuxian wanted to was never. Just like Huaisang would have hidden his cunning forever. Just as he himself would never have told Xichen about his imminent death.

He stared down at his pathetic attempt at a letter.

Chenqing meant to explain oneself.

How long had Wei Wuxian had that name in mind? When he held the flute between himself and Wangji, did he know the only thing separating them was an explanation? When he fiddled with it, and reached for it whenever someone asked about his sword, was that his way of acknowledging his inner desire to explain?

This was his chance to explain, and still Wei Wuxian would have left much out.

Nie Mingjue couldn't do the same to Huaisang.

"Is writing about your feelings really so difficult?" Lady Luo inquired.

Nie Mingjue half wished they could go back to the previous day when Lady Luo still respected him. Or maybe she was just speaking for his brother when Huaisang couldn't.

**"Well then," She smiled, "Let's change the topic. You've just returned. Some sleep is necessary. I...I'll deliver some soup to A-Cheng."**

**"You're so unfair, Shijie," Wei Wuxian pouted, "You left Jiang Cheng with so much soup."**

**She smiled and rose.**

**"Shijie," He called after her, "It tastes fantastic."**

**Jiang Yanli's smile grew wider, "XianXian, you're really back." His smile dimmed a little, "It's so comforting."**

**The next morning Wei Wuxian tried meditating again. The resentment poured out of him, filling the room in inky black tendrils. He struggled against a mental foe, culminating in a shout of pain as he released his control. He struggled to breathe on the bed, his hand coming up to cup the pouch holding the Stygian Tiger Amulet.**

**He got up and walked out.**

Jiang Cheng clenched his hands into fists, "He was being responsible."

That was why he went missing before such an important meeting. If he couldn't control the resentment within him while he was all alone, it wouldn't be improved by surrounding himself with hostile 'allies' and talking about the Wen Sect he wanted to fight.



Still, there were a few murmurs about Wei Wuxian.

“The responsible thing to do would be to inform someone,” Sect Leader Su sneered.

“And be forbidden from fighting?” Zewu-Jun asked sharply.

“If there was a chance his weapon would turn on us-”

“We took many risks during the war. Trusting Wei Wuxian was one of them,” Zewu-Jun interrupted, “I don’t expect Su-zongzhu to understand. He never had to make such decisions.”

Nie Huaisang snickered.

Jiang Cheng fought back a smirk. He didn’t think Zewu-Jun had it in him. Then again, the entire Lan Sect took the existence of the Su Sect as an insult.

All it took was one mishap with Su She’s robes and they could prove he was the one who cursed Jin Zixun. Between all of them, they could find a way to make that mishap happen.

Or they could just throw Lianfeng-Zun under the cart.

As tempting as the thought was...he remembered how hard it was when he became Sect Leader. He wouldn’t undermine Jin Zixuan in a matter he claimed responsibility for. Lianfeng-Zun was his brother. His decision.

Jiang Cheng let others convince him what to do with Wei Wuxian. He couldn’t do that to Jin Zixuan.

**The memory switched to the full meeting of the Sunshot Campaign. Jin Zixun stood with Jin Zixuan. Lan Xichen stood with Lan Wangji. Nie Huaisang stood with Nie Mingjue. Only Jiang Cheng stood alone on his side of the map.**

**“Even though we are not holding an official conference here,” Jin Zixun said, “Isn’t this Wei Wuxian a little arrogant? We waited for him for so long on account of his slaying Wen Chao. Chifeng-Zun, he killed Wen Chao, but you also killed Wen Xu. Meritorious as he is, he still has no right to let us wait for him.”**

**Lan Xichen glanced at his brother, who was stubbornly not reacting.**

**Jiang Cheng saluted, “Gentlemen, Wei Wuxian just arrived at Qinghe and he has survived a severe wound.”**

Which was true.

Outwardly, Wei Wuxian had seemed fine. They saw his behavior had changed, so they assumed his intentions had changed.

They couldn’t see the injuries inflicted upon him, so they assumed they were nonexistent.

They couldn't see the battles he was fighting, so they assumed there weren't any.

Oh how wrong they were.

**“A severe wound?” Jin Zixun echoed in disbelief, “I could hardly see any severe wounds on him.” He rounded the table, “Jiang-zongzhu, you’re the leader of the Jiang Sect now. Wei Ying is your subordinate. You ordered him to attend the meeting. There should be no reason for him not to come.”**

**“I just wonder if he’s doing something without your knowledge again,” Jin Zixun provoked, “It can’t be that he has gone to practice those crooked tricks again, right?”**

**Jiang Cheng finally looked at him, “This is a domestic affair. It’s none of the Jin Sect’s business.”**

**Jin Zixun inhaled sharply.**

**“Enough,” Nie Mingjue interrupted, “Let’s stop discussing such matters.”**

**Nie Huaisang hid a smile behind his fan.**

“No wonder Jin Zixun was cursed,” Qin Su murmured.

She gasped immediately after saying that, too mortified by her own boldness to hear how the Nie Sect disciples behind her laughed and echoed her sentiments.

But really. With the way Sect Leader Yao and Sect Leader Ouyang went on about events, she expected more from Jin Zixun. They appreciated his frankness, but all she saw was someone who felt he deserved to speak on matters that were none of his business. They thought him righteous to oppose Wei Wuxian when he was just kicking a man while he was down.

“Are you suggesting Wei Wuxian cursed him?” Sect Leader Yao asked.

“Can Wei Wuxian even use that curse without a golden core?” Luo Qingyang asked, then rolled her eyes, “Besides, is that Wei Wuxian’s style? If he wanted someone dead he’d just go and kill them, wouldn’t he?”

Which wasn’t exactly helpful to Wei Wuxian either.

“I just meant…” Qin Su trailed off, collecting her thoughts, “If Jin-gongzi felt he could speak to Jiang-zongzhu in such a manner, then he has likely insulted others, yes?”

“I wouldn’t let anyone speak to me about my own disciples like that,” Chifeng-Zun supported her.

“The same goes for me,” Zewu-Jun agreed, and Qin Su felt like she could breathe again, “Jin Zixun took advantage of Jiang Wanyin’s recent rise to Sect Leader to be disrespectful.”

Jin Zixun rose in his seat to argue, but what could he say? Wei Wuxian was traumatized, carrying an evil beyond comprehension that he would use against their enemy to win the war.

Comparatively, he was picking fights amongst his allies, and the Jin Sect was already on thin ice for their meager contributions to the war.

In the end, he said nothing.

“I’m glad he finally has some sense,” Luo Qingyang whispered.

**“Now that Wen Ruohan has lost his two sons, he is like a man without arms,” Nie Mingjue continued, “So it’s our best chance to stick together and conquer Qishan. Victory or defeat is in this battle. We shall make a concerted effort.”**

**“Chifeng-Zun is right,” Lan Xichen agreed, “Jiang-zongzhu, if Wei-gongzi can’t make it here today, please relay to him our discussion today.”**

**Jiang Cheng saluted him, then Nie Mingjue.**

**“That’s enough. Let’s resume our conference,” Nie Mingjue declared.**

**Lan Xichen just looked back at Lan Wangji again, who only seemed more upset.**

They had taken advantage of Jiang Wanyin’s youth, hadn’t they?

They thought he was too weak to control Wei Wuxian, when in reality, no one could have controlled him. It wasn’t a matter of experience or power.

They forced him to apologize for actions that weren’t his own. They forced him to give ground on matters he should have stood strong on. They forced him to kick out Wei Wuxian. They hinted the Jiang Sect was diminished under his leadership, when they should have been supporting him to ensure that didn’t happen.

Not that the other major Sects had any right to judge them for it.

Hadn’t they done the same? Why wasn’t Sect Leader Jiang included in the sworn brotherhood? A member of the other three major Sects was there, including two Sect Leaders.

Wasn’t their support now too little too late?

**Wei Wuxian stood on a ridge near the Unclean Realm. He listened as crows cried, and Nie Sect disciples led prisoners away, “Move! Catch up! Hurry Up!” If the prisoners didn’t comply fast enough, they were whipped.**

**Even from his distance, he could tell not everyone in the group were cultivators. He spotted old men and women.**

**As his anger rose, so did the resentment he carried with him. He pressed a hand to his chest, but the dark energy nevertheless poured out. He fell to one knee, Chenqing supporting him. One Wen broke away, only to be brutally beaten and left at the mercy of the crows.**

**“Popo,” Wen Qing comforted the elderly woman, “Don’t be afraid. We just need to follow.”**

**“A-Qing, where are they taking us?” The older woman asked.**

**Wen Qing just shook her head, “I have no idea. Maybe to the Wen slave camp. I wonder if A-Ning is also there.”**

**“Retributive,” Madam Wen muttered, “If Wen-zongzhu hadn’t released the fairy, today you would not...you and A-Ning would not be incriminated by the Wen Sect.”**

**“Popo, it’s alright,” Wen Qing said, “As long as A-Ning’s alright.”**

**Wei Wuxian continued to struggle to contain himself. When the elderly woman fell, his arm with the flute came up to his mouth. When Wen Qing was beaten, he began to play.**

**“My sincere apologies for the actions of my Sect,” Nie Huaisang recited.**

**It was the least he could do. Well, he supposed if Jiang Cheng was really going to activate Zidian in the hall he could take a few blows.**

**Wen Qing dipped her head in a small nod of acknowledgment.**

**“You were so close,” Jiang Cheng growled.**

**“I would never have dared to go to the Unclean Realm,” Wen Qing explained, “And I let myself be captured. It was the only way to see if A-Ning was in that prison.”**

**“I don’t remember this incident being reported,” Jin Guangshan commented.**

**Nie Huaisang did, and he’d burned the report before it could reach the eyes of anyone who would do something about it. He hadn’t been happy about who they were taking prisoner either, but potential spies were potential spies.**

**“He was already struggling to control his new power,” Nie Huaisang reasoned, “Did you think the sight of an old woman being beaten would help?”**

**“I only meant that no one died here,” Jin Guangshan raised his eyebrows, “Shouldn’t he improve over time?”**

**“Shouldn’t anger lessen over time?” Jin Zixuan challenged, “It’s one thing to beat prisoners during the war, when there was a chance the Wen Sect could beat us through any means. It is another to continue the practice after the war is over and there is no threat.”**

**“There is always a threat,” Jin Guangshan warned.**

**Jin Zixuan huffed, “Are we so weak as to be unable to handle it? Did we not defeat the Wen Sect at the height of their power? What are you so threatened by?”**

That was poorly said. Nie Huaisang didn't think Jin Guangshan would kill his own son, but it wasn't like he didn't have plenty of spare heirs scattered across the land.

**That's when Jiang Yanli found him.**

**The effect of his music was immediate and powerful. Everyone clutched their heads. Rocks fell. The crows scattered as the wind blew.**

**Wei Wuxian was swathed in energy, and he didn't look in complete control of himself as he played. He finally did stop when Wen Qing's hood fell off.**

**"This place is haunted!"**

**Wei Wuxian continued to watch them, unnoticed by all but Wen Qing, who looked back and made eye contact.**

There were a few sighs of relief.

Wei Wuxian regained control of himself before any devastating consequences could occur.

And it wasn't like this was unprovoked aggression. Wei Wuxian was a righteous man who knew that not all Wens were evil. Of course he would be angered at the site of civilians being beaten. Once that anger was released, reason returned and he realized he was hurting those civilians as well.

Was he always provoked?

**Jiang Yanli chose then to approach him, "A-Xian, what's the matter?"**

**"Nothing," He shook his head, "Shijie, why are you here?"**

**"On Zewu-Jun's arrival, Chifeng-Zun called everybody to a meeting," Jiang Yanli explained, "A-Cheng was looking for you everywhere. A-Xian..." She followed his gaze and looked out over the cliff, "What...what just happened?"**

**"It was..." Wei Wuxian trailed off, "It was the strong wind. It broke several branches."**

**"Really?" She asked skeptically, but accepted his lie, "Since it's nothing, let's go back now." She turned to leave, but he didn't follow. She turned back, "A-Xian, what is it?"**

**"I'm fine," He came back to himself, "Let's go, Shijie."**

"He didn't even know about the meeting," Jin Guangyao felt the need to comment.

It didn't matter in the grand scheme of things, but they couldn't accuse Wei Wuxian of disobeying orders he was never given. If he'd meditated early enough in the day, if he'd left before Er-ge returned and didn't know about the meeting, then how could they say he was being disrespectful?

Then again, if he was ever to undo the damage to Wei Wuxian's reputation, he couldn't let these little details go unnoticed.

Jin Guangyao ignored the tension between Zixuan and their father. It was too...tempting. He hated that there was still a part of him that was so desperate for his father's recognition that he was considering widening the gap between the two. He hated that the allure of being the Sect Heir made him come up with plans he'd never get away with carrying out.

He hated himself more and more.

**Back in the war meeting, Nie Mingjue brought them back to the table, "As all of you have just stated, Wen Ruohan lost his sons. There is no one capable of leading troops to flank us. Only the army in Qishan remains. We can lead our troops straight to the Wen Sect's den and devastate it for good."**

**"Be that as it may," Lan Xichen said, "I hope everyone keeps their guards up. Wen Ruohan's sons are not his ace. It's the Yin Iron and his puppets."**

**"Zewu-Jun is right," Jin Zixuan agreed, "Wen Ruohan was able to slaughter various cultivation Sects, just because of his control over the Yin Iron. He can manipulate other people. Turn people into puppets against us."**

**"This is exactly what we shall deliberate over today," Nie Mingjue said, "How to cope with the Yin Iron in Wen Ruohan's hands."**

**With perfect timing, Wei Wuxian entered the room. Everyone inside had to shield their eyes from the win he brought with him.**

Still so angry, but with just cause.

Here he was, before the man who ordered elders be taken to prison and beaten along the way.

Should he have pretended to be happy? Wouldn't keeping more of his displeasure inside have caused a larger explosion later?

**"Wei-xiong," Nie Huaisang greeted.**

**"Wei Wuxian," Jin Zixun regarded him suspiciously.**

**Jiang Cheng walked up to him as Wei Wuxian offered a shallow greeting, "Nie-zongzhu, Wen Ruohan's Yin Iron might be outside of our concern."**

Might be.

Wei Wuxian was confident in his abilities, but he didn't have full control over the Amulet yet.

Like all things, it took time and practice.

He just didn't have the time, and there was nowhere safe to practice.

Nie Mingjue shot a look at Lan Xichen, who was only focused on Wei Wuxian.

**"What do you mean? Jin Zixuan asked.**

**"Maybe there are some countermeasures against Yin Iron," Wei Wuxian continued.**

**"Wei-gongzi," Lan Xichen stepped closer, "Please elaborate."**

**"Zewu-Jun," Wei Wuxian replied, "I don't mean to conceal it." He brought his hand up to where he was concealing it, his confidence faltering as he also looked at Lan Wangji, "We'll see in about a month." He then bowed again and left.**

**"Wei-gongzi," Lan Xichen called after him, "Why did you stop carrying your sword?"**

**Wei Wuxian turned, "I'm just not in the mood."**

**He nodded to Jiang Cheng, then they both left.**

**"Thank you for trusting him," Jiang Yanli offered a small smile.**

It wasn't like there were many options, but they could have also chosen to press the issue. They could have tried to force answers from A-Xian. They could have raided his rooms or searched his body for the Yin Iron they suspected he stole.

Instead, they chose to push forward with their plans with nothing more than a flimsy promise from A-Xian.

It was far nicer to frame it as trust rather than desperation.

If they really trusted A-Xian, Chifeng-Zun would never have tried to assassinate Wen Ruohan.

But no one pointed that out.

**"That Wei Wuxian...is he intending to fool us?" Jin Zixun demanded, "How can there be something to counter the Yin Iron? Does it counter itself?"**

**Lan Xichen shared a long look with Nie Mingjue, then took his leave with his brother.**

**"Wangji," He started as they reached a pavilion, "Why is Wei-gongzi so confident that we can acquire the Yin Iron against Wen Ruohan in a month?"**

**Lan Wangji stayed silent for a moment, before admitting, "I don't know."**

**"So many predecessors failed for Yin Iron," Lan Xichen shook his head, "I'm afraid Wei-gongzi is overconfident." He looked down, then back to his brother, "Wangji, I'd like to ask you something." Wangji met his gaze, "Were the deaths at the Supervisory Office really related to Yin Iron?"**

**“No,” Lan Wangji answered, “Xiongzhang. He’s not like that.”**

**Lan Xichen nodded, “But what happened there was strange indeed. When you approached Yiling, was there anything unusual?”**

**“Xichen,” Lan Wangji started, “Are there rules already set for everything in the world?”**

Hanguang-Jun avoided the question.

Though Wei Wuxian’s demonic cultivation really wasn’t the same as the other usages of Yin Iron. For one, he hadn’t used it to create any puppets. Nor did he use it on anything still alive. He wasn’t like Xue Yang or Wen Ruohan.

So while the deaths of the Wens were certainly related to the Yin Iron, it wasn’t in the cruel manner the others used it.

Honestly, with the exception of Wen Chao, the other deaths were rather quick. One night instead of the several of Xue Yang’s torture and Wen Ruohan’s months of control.

Jin Zixuan found himself perking up at the question Hanguang-Jun posed.

He found himself in an impossible situation with little to no precedent. There weren’t rules set for what to do about Guangyao. He couldn’t ask Zewu-Jun for advice now that he was biased, but hopefully he could use his past words on his present situation.

When a matter wasn’t black or white, how should one decide where grey belongs?

**Lan Xichen thoughtfully looked away, “I once thought that if I spent my life reading all the books from the Lan Sect’s library, I could figure out the truth of the world. But I found out that even if I finish all existing books,” He walked past him, “There are still so many puzzles in the world.”**

**He turned back, “There are no set rules. There isn’t a clear line between right and wrong.”**

**“If people can’t be judged simply in this way,” Lan Wangji faced him, “Then how can we evaluate a person?”**

**“What makes us human,” Lan Xichen answered, “Can’t be judged simply as right or wrong. It lies within ourselves. As we evaluate others, we shall not label them as black or white,” He brought his hand to his chest, “But know their deep intentions inside.” He smiled.**

Xichen was probably thinking about Lianfeng-Zun when he said that.

It turned out he didn’t know Lianfeng-Zun’s intentions.

Lan Wangji should have trusted Wei Ying more. There should never have been any doubt about his intentions. Wei Ying wanted to stand with justice and live with no regrets. He heard



his wish, his heart's intent. Just because the method had changed didn't mean the intention had.

"There can't be a rule for everything, I suppose," Nie Huaisang said.

If only there could.

But he wouldn't have Wei Ying any other way but his unique, unprecedented self.

**Lan Wangji looked at his hand over his heart, then to the side, where Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng approached. Wei Wuxian froze, making eye contact with Lan Wangji.**

**Jiang Cheng watched his brother worriedly.**

**Lan Xichen watched his own with the same worry.**

**Wei Wuxian forced a smile, greeted them, glanced at Lan Wangji again, then left. Jiang Cheng frowned, then hurried after him.**

**"Wangji," Lan Xichen said, "If you're worried about Wei-gongzi..."**

**"Not a bit," Lan Wangji turned the opposite direction and left.**

Such foolishness!

How could they have been so mistaken? They thought Hanguang-Jun disapproved of Wei Wuxian's cultivation style out of his inherent righteousness! They never thought it would be anger born from worry, or that the worry came from love.

This wasn't a battle between a righteous hero and a wicked villain.

This was as Nie Huaisang said earlier. A lover's quarrel.

**"Be frank with me," Jiang Cheng demanded as he caught up to Wei Wuxian.**

**"What do you mean?" Wei Wuxian asked.**

**"You and Lan Wangji decided to cut your association just like that?" Jiang Cheng asked.**

**"Lan Zhan cut the association," Wei Wuxian corrected, "I didn't."**

If Wangji were holding anything in his hands, he would have crushed it.

Lan Qiren almost wanted to crush something himself. It was frustrating to watch, and every misunderstanding was just another knot to detangle later.

The only bright side was that Wangji had his work cut out for him convincing Wei Wuxian he didn't hate him. That meant the danger of elopement was far lower. Wei Wuxian was stubborn like that.

**“He didn’t want to respond to you anyway,” Jiang Cheng pointed out.**

**Wei Wuxian stopped and turned to him, “Jiang Cheng, I remember you did not like him. Why are you speaking for him now?”**

**“Nonsense,” Jiang Cheng huffed, “We are on the same side now. The four major Sects are sticking together. There is no need to fuss about such trivial things.” Wei Wuxian crossed his arms, “Besides, back in Yiling it was...ay, anyway, you should not talk about that nonsense again. You should stay on the righteous path of swordsmanship.”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, puffing his cheeks out.**

**“What’s the matter?” Jiang Cheng demanded.**

**“Just now,” Wei Wuxian said, “You really acted like a Sect Leader.”**

**Jiang Cheng shook his head and stormed off.**

**“Nonsense?” Wen Qing asked.**

Jiang Wanyin huffed, “If Hanguang-Jun was going to be an idiot I didn’t want Wei Wuxian worrying about him.”

“Hm,” She thought about all the times Wei Wuxian fell into moping about Hanguang-Jun and wished it were so easy to do away with longing.

“Will you let him go to the Lan Sect?” Nie Huaisang asked, “If he chooses more nonsense?”

“He doesn’t exactly make the best choices for himself,” Jiang Wanyin muttered, “But if he genuinely wants to go to Cloud Recesses...I didn’t stop A-Jie from marrying that peacock.”

“All this effort and you might not get him back,” Nie Huaisang said, “Not in the way you want.”

“As long as there is a him to have-” Jiang Wanyin cut herself off with an apologetic look towards her.

As long as Wei Wuxian was alive, Jiang Wanyin could make peace with his decisions. All his decisions.

Wen Qing’s brother was long dead. There was very little that could be done to hurt him now. She didn’t have to worry about him being married off to another Sect either. He would never leave her side.

Unless he wanted to. After all, corpses didn’t age. Wei Wuxian assured her A-Ning’s life force wasn’t tied to him. A-Ning would continue to exist far longer than she would. Would it be kinder to let him go out and experience the world so he wouldn’t be lost without her? Or could she be selfish and keep him by her side until she was no longer able to?

It was tempting to be selfish. It was hard to let go.

**Lan Wangji tried again to approach Wei Wuxian's room. He lifted his hand to knock, but ended up clenching it into a fist and turning away.**

**Jiang Yanli caught him as he tried to leave, "Lan-er-gongzi."**

**He turned back to greet her, "Jiang-guniang."**

**"You're here for A-Xian?" She asked.**

**Lan Wangji just saluted again and made to leave.**

A few snickered at how strange this all turned out to be.

Hanguang-Jun faced down demonic entities on a regular basis. He went into battle unafraid. He helped kill the Xuanwu of Slaughter with no weapons except the bloodied bowstrings of the enemy. Many considered him fearless.

Yet he couldn't knock on Wei Wuxian's door. He was too scared of rejection.

Nor could he face Jiang Yanli when she caught him there.

It was all too...human, of their hero.

**"Lan-er-gongzi," She stopped him, "I need to ask you about something." He only hesitated a moment before turning to her. Taking this as permission she asked, "A-Xian's new methods...are they dangerous?"**

**"This method will harm the body and distort the temperament," Lan Wangji answered.**

**"What..." She trailed off, "What should be done then?"**

**"Swordsmanship is the most decent technique," Lan Wangji said, "Talismans and spells can only assist it. They can't be used as a cultivation method."**

**Wei Wuxian rounded the corner. They both looked at him, "Lan Zhan, what did you tell Shijie?"**

**"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji replied.**

**Wei Wuxian stepped closer, "I remember telling you to stay out of our business."**

**"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli interjected, "Lan-er-gongzi was just-"**

**But Lan Wangji was already leaving.**

Creating more misunderstandings.

Nie Mingjue reread the letter he planned to send to Huaisang. He couldn't let this situation between them escalate to this point. He didn't want his brother to return to hiding. He didn't want his brother to push him away.

Once Jin Guangshan had been dealt with, he would put down his saber. He would submit himself to whatever treatment Wen Qing advised. He would stop going on night hunts for glory. If he needed to for appearances sake, he would have Xichen and Jin Guangyao beside him to make up for his inability.

If another large threat appeared, then he would trust Huaisang to deal with it.

He was sacrificing a lot, but it was the only way he could think of to prove to Huaisang that he valued him more than his cultivation. He was a man of his word, and once the vow was made he wouldn't go against it.

Besides, compared to what others had sacrificed, this felt like very little.

**“What happened, A-Xian?” Jiang Yanli asked, “I was worried about you, so I asked Lan-er-gongzi. Why are you so mad?”**

**“Shijie,” Wei Wuxian’s anger left him, “Has he...told you about the Yiling Supervisory Office?”**

**She glanced away, then shook her head, “He said nothing.”**

**Wei Wuxian ran off, chasing Lan Wangji down before he got too far, “Lan Zhan!” Lan Wangji slowed, “Lan Zhan, listen to me.”**

**Lan Wangji drew his sword and slashed at Wei Wuxian, who stepped back in time to avoid it. He blocked the next blow with Chenqing, and the next two after. He then had to flip back to avoid the fourth. He didn’t try to defend himself as Lan Wangji brought his blade point first to Wei Wuxian’s throat.**

“You attacked him?” Jiang Cheng nearly shouted.

Hanguang-Jun grimaced.

“How was that going to convince him you wanted to be friends again?” He continued.

“I...” The love of his idiot brother’s life shifted, “I expected him to defend himself.”

Jiang Cheng scoffed, “As if he would ever raise a hand against you.”

“He wouldn’t?” Jin Guangshan asked.

Fuck. Jiang Cheng’s anger died down immediately at the interest in his tone. It wasn’t a strong possibility. Just as there were no circumstances he could imagine Wei Wuxian actively trying to kill Hanguang-Jun, there were even fewer where Hanguang-Jun would try to kill Wei Wuxian. Not without significant misunderstandings and pressure from other people.

But the fact of the matter was plain.

Wei Wuxian would let his defenses down for Hanguang-Jun. He’d let himself be vulnerable in a way he wouldn’t be around Jiang Cheng.

If there was anyone who could kill Wei Wuxian with minimal collateral damage, it was Hanguang-Jun.

Who people might actually expect to kill him.

“I don’t know,” Jiang Cheng lied.

**Wei Wuxian just closed his eyes, accepting his death.**

**When it didn’t come, he looked down at the blade, then at the man wielding it.**

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian sighed, “After several months, you’ve made progress again.”**

**“It’s you who didn’t make any progress,” Lan Wangji replied, “Where is Suibian?”**

**Wei Wuxian’s hand clenched Chenqing tighter, before he forced himself to relax. He led Lan Wangji elsewhere as the sun set, eventually climbing onto the roof.**

**“Lan Zhan,” He leaned back, “Don’t you feel this place is very familiar?” He crossed one leg over the other, “That year, in Cloud Recesses, you and I were face-to-face like this.”**

**“We were fighting,” Lan Wangji corrected.**

**“Right, right,” Wei Wuxian rocked forward, “It’s when I broke curfew and was caught by you, Lan-er-gongzi.” He laughed, “It’s a pity that there is no Emperor’s Smile now.” He laid back with a sigh.**

**“Things change,” Lan Wangji said, “How could it be the same?”**

How could they be the same?

Was it possible for love to persevere through all that?

And yet, there they sat. This time, Lan Wangji could stay to sit on the roof with Wei Wuxian. This time, Wei Wuxian was sober and fully conscious of where he was. They were dressed differently. There was no longer the lightheartedness of the time before the war. Wei Wuxian was the one with Yin Iron, but all Sects were threatened now.

Too many of them watched, waiting for what seemed like an inevitable fallout.

Was that not going to happen?

Were they going to come to some understanding?

Then...why was Hanguang-Jun sitting here and not in the Burial Mounds with Wei Wuxian?

**Wei Wuxian smiled, then got serious, “Lan Zhan, thank you.”**

**“For what?”**

**“Thank you for not telling Shijie,” Wei Wuxian elaborated, then chuckled.**

**“Demonic cultivation will harm your body and your temperament as well,” Lan Wangji warned.**

**“I know,” Wei Wuxian admitted, “But Lan Zhan, what I’m practicing is not Xue Chonghai’s manipulation of Yin Iron. It’s something else.”**

**“Something else?” Lan Wangji repeated.**

**“Yes,” Wei Wuxian nodded, then sat up, “It was what I learned in a sunless, dingy place for three months.” He looked lost in thought for a moment, “But, after all, I have to thank you for the Lan Sect’s temperament technique. My new cultivation requires practicing temperament and studying talismans.”**

**He twirled Chenqing, “With a bamboo flute, everything can be controlled.”**

**“It was more of the truth than anyone else got,” A-Yao offered.**

Lan Xichen noticed that too. Wangji even got Wei Wuxian to admit to knowing that what he was doing was harmful.

It really showed that Wei Wuxian wasn’t arrogant. He wasn’t messing with resentful energy without due caution. He knew he needed to meditate to keep himself from going crazy. He also knew to use talismans to avoid using too much energy all at once. He was taking as many precautions as he could.

But he couldn’t give Wangji what he wanted. He couldn’t give it up entirely.

**“You said it yourself, people change,” Lan Xichen comforted.**

**“Circumstances change,” Wangji said, “Wei Ying’s heart is still the same.”**

He worried that seeing how close he’d come to killing Wei Wuxian had shaken him. He certainly hadn’t expected the attack. Wangji just tried to prove that traditional cultivation was stronger, but Wei Wuxian took it as an attempt to stop him permanently. He took Wangji’s hesitation as an opportunity to explain a little.

A compromise.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t the same person he’d been. He wasn’t what any of them expected him to be. As much as they wanted the old Wei Wuxian back, it was impossible to go backwards.

There was only forward.

**“Does your control rely on the spirit?” Lan Wangji asked.**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, not bothering to come up with a lie.**

**“Mastering it by mind would be like taking a grain from a burning fire,” Lan Wangji continued, “If not done carefully, you’re at risk of degenerating into demonic cultivation. The consequences will be unimaginable.”**

**“I know,” Wei Wuxian insisted, then leaned closer, “Lan Zhan, I understand your concern. But I, Wei Ying, promise you that I will never degenerate into demonic cultivation.” He brought his hand down, “Do you believe me?”**

**Lan Wangji slowly averted his gaze in a small nod.**

**Wei Wuxian got up and descended from the roof.**

**“Let me help you,” Lan Wangji requested.**

**Wei Wuxian glanced back, “Okay.” Then he walked away.**

MianMian huffed as she drew the proper symbols on the note to send it directly to Nie Huaisang.

Hanguang-Jun got more of the truth than anyone else.

Then he got three consecutive lies. A lie of omission when Wei Wuxian said his new cultivation depended on his spiritual energy. Not that he could say he didn’t have any. Then he promised to never degenerate into demonic cultivation. This one could be dismissed as word play. He was obviously using demonic cultivation, but he himself wasn’t being demonic.

Was it really demonic cultivation if he wasn’t using it for evil purposes? He used Chenqing and the Amulet to end the war. Others used traditional means to kill innocents. Who was worse?

Then the last lie. Permitting Hanguang-Jun to help.

As though Wei Wuxian would allow Hanguang-Jun to taint his reputation by involving him in his plans. Even now, people wondered why Hanguang-Jun was here when his heart was elsewhere.

The answer was simple. Hanguang-Jun would stay with Wei Wuxian if he asked.

Wei Wuxian would never ask.

MianMian poured a little of her spiritual energy into the talisman, and watched it fold into a butterfly.

She hoped Chifeng-Zun would communicate properly.

I'm a few hours late to posting this on my birthday. Happy belated birthday to me!  
Happy birthday to my brother!

As for the SVSSS and TGCF fics, I might write chapter 1 for each and post them in a series so they are easy to find. I won't continue them until this is done, but we are drawing closer to the end. Still haven't decided what that will be. I also decided against a title change to avoid confusion.

Thank you for all your support!



# The Sun Sets

## Chapter Summary

And darkness settles in

## Chapter Notes

Don't you just love how there's so much buildup to the Sunshot Campaign, then we just speedrun through it?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Da-ge would put down his saber once Jin Guangshan was dealt with.

Nie Huaisang reread the note for the dozenth time, then passed it to Wen Qing. He couldn't bring himself to ask if his brother even had enough time for that. The truth of the Wen Remnants wouldn't be enough to stop Jin Guangshan. Maybe censor him, maybe remove him as Sect Leader in name, but there were too many people loyal to him.

Which was where San-ge would come in, but Nie Huaisang was waiting to see what really happened during the war. If San-ge was the reason Da-ge was tortured...

He supposed San-ge could wait until after Jin Guangshan was dealt with, but if he caught even a hint of Nie Huaisang's intentions...

This was getting too complicated.

"Assassination is risky," Wen Qing whispered.

"I won't get caught," Nie Huaisang replied.

"Someone will be blamed nonetheless," She warned.

Wei Wuxian being the obvious one. Or Wen Ning. He was pretty sure he could convince Jin Zixuan to ignore it, especially if Nie Huaisang killed Jin Guangshan in a brothel. There had to be a prostitute somewhere who'd be willing to do the deed for enough money. It was a loose end, but as long as no one suspected him they wouldn't go looking for dirt.

Jiang Cheng snorted, "Your brother will know it was you."

Nie Huaisang clutched the note close to him. Would Da-ge go back on this agreement if he murdered Jin Guangshan?

**Nie Mingjue stood before the gathered disciples, “Wen Ruohan of the QishanWen intended to annex the Sects greedily. He forged the Yin Iron privately and killed the innocent cruelly. He ordered Wen Xu, Wen Chao, and his men to commit countless crimes, which brought this calamity to our Sects.”**

**“So the world is filled with indignation,” Nie Mingjue drew his saber, “Today, I, Nie Mingjue of Qinghe, am leading an army to suppress Wen Ruohan. We’ll storm into Nightless City,” He lifted the saber, “And chop off his head to sacrifice to the souls of the deceased.”**

**The disciples raised their swords, chanting, “Sunshot!”**

**“Go!” Nie Mingjue ordered, parting the disciples to lead the way.**

Why wasn’t Chifeng-Zun the Chief Cultivator?

He was the one who stepped up during the Sunshot Campaign. He was the one who brought everyone together and organized them. He was the one Sandu Shengshou and Hanguang-Jun turned to for their orders. Even Zewu-Jun reported to him.

How did Jin Guangshan manage to rise?

**Jin Zixuan and Jin Zixun followed after him with Nie Huaisang. Lan Xichen went after them.**

**“A-Jie, I’ll go first. I’ll wait for you at Qishan,” Jiang Cheng promised his sister. Jiang Yanli nodded, then he turned to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, “We should go to Qishan before the others and kill a few rascals from the Wen Sect.” He then left.**

**Wei Wuxian looked at Lan Wangji and nodded. They then departed side by side.**

“Oh good, they’re back to normal,” Nie Huaisang commented.

Jiang Cheng couldn’t help but admit that seeing them together looked right.

As much as he wanted Wei Wuxian to fight by his side, it would have given everything away. They wouldn’t have been able to fight together as smoothly as they did when Wei Wuxian used a sword. Hell, they both had new weapons going into this war. Him using a whip and Wei Wuxian depending on musical cultivation...

Was it even strategic to fight together? A mid-range weapon and a distance weapon...they couldn’t have each others’ backs like they used to.

Jiang Cheng would have insisted one of them use a sword. He couldn’t because he wanted to use Zidian to win. He wanted the Wen cultivators to die from his mother’s weapon. So he would have insisted more on Wei Wuxian taking up his sword.

Either Wei Wuxian wouldn't, leading to a huge argument, or he would try to hide how draining it was and get himself injured on the battlefield.

Hanguang-Jun kept Wei Wuxian safe where Chenqing couldn't.

Where Jiang Cheng couldn't.

**When Nie Mingjue left Qinghe, he was flanked by Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, also on horseback.**

**“Why didn't you just go with them?” Lan Wangji inquired.**

**Wei Wuxian twirled Chenqing, “I don't want to join in the fun with Jiang Cheng and that colorful peacock.”**

**“Aren't you the one who prefers to join in the fun?” Lan Wangji asked.**

**Wei Wuxian gave him that one.**

**From the ramparts, Nie Huaisang watched the army leave. He lifted his fan, “Wei-xiong!”**

**Wei Wuxian looked back.**

**“Take care!” Nie Huaisang shouted.**

**Wei Wuxian lifted his flute in acknowledgement.**

Nie Mingjue had noticed that, but he'd just been annoyed that Nie Huaisang was publicly showing how close he was to such a suspicious character.

Now it made more sense. Huaisang was more observant than the rest of them. He noticed every change in his friend. He was experienced enough to know how many of those were trauma related. Yet he couldn't keep him from the battlefield, nor could he expose him without exposing himself, so all he could do was pray for the best.

“No parting words for your brother?” Lady Qin asked.

Huaisang laughed, “This was what Da-ge always wanted. He knew what he was doing. It was just poor luck that he was captured.” His gaze flickered to Jin Guangyao, “Nothing anyone could have done about that, much less me.”

Jin Guangyao tilted his head, but his posture was tense.

Nie Mingjue had been so caught up in other matters he almost forgot the other memories he'd added to this viewing. Meng Yao torturing him, killing his disciples and taunting him in front of Wen Ruohan.

Did Huaisang think there were more wrongs to add to that?

Everything had happened all at once. Was it all according to Jin Guangyao's plan?

**Jin Zixuan struggled on the battlefield. There was a seemingly endless amount of enemies, who cut down their numbers efficiently. Jin Zixuan fought well, but was forced to dodge as his opponents burst into flames and transformed into something more dangerous.**

**He retreated to observe the battlefield.**

**Jiang Cheng faced the same difficulties where he fought.**

**“Go!” Two of his disciples grabbed his arms, dragging him away.**

**It was a massacre.**

**“Gongzi,” A Jin disciple ran up to Jin Zixuan, “Retreat quickly or we are going to be completely annihilated. Go now!”**

**Jin Zixuan watched as more died, “Go now!” He agreed reluctantly.**

**They retreated back to the main camp.**

“Why did they become so much more difficult to fight?” Jin Zixuan asked.

He wasn't ashamed of retreating here. It was the only move they could make without losing all their disciples.

“They transformed whenever Wen Ruohan directly used the Yin Iron,” Guangyao answered, his voice deceptively light.

“Could Wei Wuxian have done something about them?” Their father asked.

“Not without revealing his Yin Iron,” His brother grimaced, “If Wei Wuxian were unprepared...”

“He was unconscious for three days after beating Wen Ruohan,” A-Li said.

Three days when he'd had countless battlefields to examine and experiment with. If he'd tried to take control away from Wen Ruohan sooner, would the tyrant have come to face him earlier? Would the final battle have been more devastating? After all, even with the Yin Iron and the puppets out of the way, someone would have to defeat Wen Ruohan.

Guangyao only succeeded because his attack was completely unexpected.

“I just found it surprising he would let others die when he had a possible solution,” Their father purposely hinted, “It's so different from before.”

“Before he didn't have the future of the cultivation world depending on him,” Lan Qiren responded, “Everyone understood death was likely going into this.”

Jin Zixuan clenched his hand into a fist. The sooner his father was out of power, the better.

**Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng waited with the injured and affected until Nie Mingjue emerged from his tent. He wordlessly watched the caged disciples.**

**Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian ran over as well.**

**“When we sieged Nightless City,” Nie Mingjue took the fighters back to his tent, “Jiang and Jin suffered a great loss owing to my misjudgment. It seems the power of the Yin Iron cannot be underestimated.”**

**“Right,” Jiang Cheng agreed, “We attacked the Wen Sect until we arrived at the foot of Qishan. Those puppets were hard to destroy, as if they were unkillable. Even those with broken limbs attacked. If the power of the Yin Iron is really inexhaustible, how can we take over Nightless City?”**

**“True,” Jin Zixuan said, “Even if we had millions of troops, it’s impossible for us to fight the unkillable.”**

**“Since we can’t attack them directly,” Nie Mingjue suggested, “In my opinion, if we capture the leader the gang will collapse.”**

Lan Xichen turned towards A-Yao, “Could you have prevented Da-ge from being captured?”

He caught the meaning behind Huaisang’s words. It wasn’t a question he ever thought to ask. They won the war. Da-ge lived. He knew everything he told A-Yao and everything A-Yao told him.

He’d never wondered if A-Yao ambushed Da-ge. If that was the reason Da-ge was dragged before Wen Ruohan and tortured.

The smaller man winced, “No.”

“Did you try?” Wangji inquired.

A-Yao sighed, “He killed Wen Xu. Wen Ruohan’s focus was on Da-ge from that moment on, and that focus allowed the rest of you into Nightless City.”

Meaning it could have been anyone. It just so happened that Da-ge killed Wen Xu. Of course, who else could it have been? Wen Xu was not unskilled, and with his victory in Gusu and his younger brother’s in Yunmeng, why wouldn’t he turn his ambitions on Qinghe? With how much they sought glory, it was only natural for Wen Xu to face the best of the Nie Sect.

It wasn’t something A-Yao could have planned for. Maybe he could have given Wen Xu some advice for how to break through the Unclean Realm’s defenses, perhaps made him even more arrogant going into battle with made up flaws in Da-ge’s form, but he couldn’t have planned for Wen Chao’s demise leaving Wen Ruohan without any sons.

Lan Xichen bit back the question of why Wen Ruohan didn’t focus on Wei Wuxian. It was obvious through Wen Chao’s behavior that he wasn’t the favored son.

There needed to be a distraction, otherwise they would have been faced with even more opposition. They'd barely survived as was. It didn't make what A-Yao was about to do easier to face.

**"What do you mean?" Jiang Cheng asked.**

**"I will sneak into Nightless City alone to assassinate Wen Ruohan," Nie Mingjue stated clearly, "If he dies, his puppets will not be controlled. At that moment-"**

**"Nie-zongzhu," Jin Zixuan interrupted, "It's extremely hard to assassinate Wen Ruohan. How can we let you be in danger?"**

**Nie Mingjue stood, "As commander-in-chief, how can I sit by and see my men die in vain? If I die, Zewu-Jun will control the situation."**

**"Nie-zongzhu," Jiang Cheng protested.**

**"Mingjue-xiong," Lan Xichen walked into the tent, "I have something to present. Please have a look, everyone."**

**It was a map.**

**"This is..." Nie Mingjue turned to his friend.**

**"A formation map of Qishan," Jiang Cheng smiled.**

**"Impressive," MianMian commented, echoed by many around the room.**

**"Not when one can remember everything they see," Lianfeng-Zun held his cup tighter.**

**"You can?" Qin Su frowned, "How...useful?"**

MianMian supposed it was useful, when a lot of his time was spent organizing. He probably didn't have to go back and search through records to keep a proper inventory or balance the finances. It also explained how he was able to cultivate so well even with his lack of training. If all he had to do was see something once, there was little he couldn't learn.

**"No wonder he's so spiteful," Chifeng-Zun murmured.**

The people were lucky Wei Wuxian didn't carry with him any grievances. He was the forgetful type when it came to petty squabbles. Someone could insult him and he wouldn't hold a grudge.

Lianfeng-Zun couldn't forget. His memory didn't allow him to. If she asked, he could likely recite every insult given to him, the time of day the incident happened, and who exactly said it. How could he ever move forward with so much baggage from the past? How could he ever stop inflicting pain when he constantly relived his own?

**"Did Lianfeng-Zun do something wrong?" Qin Su lowered her voice.**

Many things.

“Ah,” She shifted in her seat, “Spy work is not always the most...honorable.”

“Is it more honorable than all the desecrated dead on the battlefields?” She asked.

“Those who died in battle saw their deaths coming,” Chifeng-Zun tensed, “It wasn’t a betrayal.”

“What loyalty did he owe you?” Qin Su wondered, her question not quite defensive, but thoughtful in the way of someone inexperienced in their world, “After being thrown out of the Jin and Nie Sect I’d say we are lucky he stayed on our side.”

**Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were still outside with the afflicted.**

**“How did this happen to them?” Wei Wuxian asked a Nie disciple.**

**“If you come across the Wen Sect’s puppets, it is better to be killed by a sword,” The disciple replied, “If we aren’t careful enough and touch their bloody cracks, we will be like them.”**

**“It seems that three tactical deployments of Qishan have dramatically increased the Yin Iron’s power,” Wei Wuxian said thoughtfully.**

**Lan Wangji continued to try and heal one. Wei Wuxian approached him as he stood, “What’s wrong, Lan Zhan?” Lan Wangji didn’t respond, “Is it incurable?”**

**“It requires at least three months’ transfusion of spiritual power,” Lan Wangji said.**

**Wei Wuxian absorbed the information with a frown.**

It was interesting to see the contrast in planning.

Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun both knew there might be a way to counter the Yin Iron.

While Wei Wuxian hinted that to the others, they didn’t fully believe him. Hence their plan to attack Qishan and kill Wen Ruohan.

The Sect Leaders, and Jin Zixuan, would have failed without Wei Wuxian.

They wondered if the same could be said of Wei Wuxian. How much had he needed their army to get to Qishan? He had waited until the very end to unleash his weapon, and even then he wasn’t the one to kill Wen Ruohan.

Neither plan could have succeeded without the other.

**Before he could make any suggestions a Jin disciple ran up, “Wei-gongzi.”**

**“What happened?” Wei Wuxian asked without fully turning.**

**“Come and have a look quickly!” The Jin disciple insisted, “Jiang-guniang...Jiang-guniang, she...”**

**That grabbed Wei Wuxian’s attention, and he went running.**

“Is this the first time Wei Wuxian attacked you, Zixuan?” Jin Guangshan asked.

Jiang Yanli held back a shudder, “It was a misunderstanding.”

“Every action has its consequences,” Her father-in-law shook his head, “Attacking an ally during the war...”

“I deserved it,” A-Xuan met his father’s gaze, “Nothing Wei Wuxian did was wrong.”

And yet, that wasn’t how the incident was spoken of later. It became twisted to make A-Xian seem more violent. Their fear tainted the truth. With mostly Jin disciples there to confirm the story, of course it would always favor her husband.

A-Cheng couldn’t defend him against what he didn’t know. Especially when neither of them could say they trusted A-Xian to act completely rational.

“We’ll see what really happened,” A-Cheng said.

A-Li gripped her husband’s hand tighter. She’d long forgiven him for this, but A-Cheng had never had the chance to even be angry over it.

**Wei Wuxian quickly found the right tent, shouting, “Shijie!” Ahead of him as he entered, “Shijie.”**

**“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli sniffled through her tears.**

**He took her arm, “Shijie. What happened to you?”**

**She shook her head, too upset for words.**

**“Don’t cry,” Wei Wuxian comforted, “Tell me. Was there someone who bullied you?” He shot a glare at Jin Zixuan, who was turned away from the situation and flicked his robes at him.**

**“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli managed, “I’m fine. Let’s go.”**

**But Wei Wuxian was immovable. She tugged at his arm, “Come on.”**

This was surprisingly familiar.

It reminded them all of when Jin Zixuan had insulted Jiang Yanli in the Cloud Recesses.

It was the same protective rage. Not anything new born from his demonic cultivation.

This was still the same Wei Wuxian. There were just harsher consequences to him getting angry.



**MianMian entered and gave a shallow bow to Jin Zixuan before turning to Wei Wuxian. Her greeting placed her between the two men. She bowed shallowly again, “Wei-gongzi.”**

**“You came at the right time,” Wei Wuxian stated, “Tell me what on earth happened here.”**

**“Wei-gongzi, it’s not what you think-” MianMian tried to calm him down.**

**“Just tell me what you know!” Wei Wuxian raised his voice.**

**MianMian hesitated, looking at Jin Zixuan, who just gave his permission, “Go ahead. Tell the truth. It looks like we, the Jin Sect, did something shameful.”**

**Wei Wuxian moved Chenqing to his dominant hand, “You-”**

Jin Guangyao could almost feel the good reputation Jin Zixuan was building stall.

It was so hard to build something, and so easy for it to break. Everyone was getting another reminder of just how aloof and arrogant Jin Zixuan was. It just seemed to contradict the open, earnest young man who came to help in the war under the guise of returning Jiang Yanli to her only remaining family.

“You did your job well, Lady Luo,” Er-ge complimented.

Lady Luo smiled, “I’m sure you understand what it’s like to communicate for someone.”

Er-ge managed a small huff of laughter, “If only Jin Zixuan used less words.”

Making light of this matter was probably the best course of action.

Even if there was a sad undertone to it. Da-ge and Er-ge were childhood best friends. Jiang Wanyin and Wei Wuxian had each other, and their sister. Huaisang found a best friend in Wei Wuxian at an early age as well. Then there was Jin Zixuan and Hanguang-Jun. At least Hanguang-Jun had Er-ge who understood him.

Jin Zixuan didn’t have anyone who qualified as a friend. Lady Luo came close, but there was always that gap from status.

It was hard to be alone growing up. It made it hard to be around people later in life.

**“Wei-gongzi,” MianMian interjected as Jiang Yanli grabbed his arm.**

**Lan Wangji flipped open the entrance to the tent as she began her explanation.**

**“Here’s the thing,” MianMian said, “Since Jiang-guniang is with the army, she has cured the injured while helping with the food.” Lan Wangji closed the tent and waited outside, “Every day, Jiang-guniang makes three more bowls of soup, two of which are for you, Wei-gongzi and Jiang-zongzhu. And the third one...” She glanced back, “Is for Jin-gongzi.”**

**“Nonsense,” Jin Zixuan faced them, “It’s A-Yuan.”**

**“Gongzi, that’s not the case,” MianMian let out a frustrated huff, “Jiang-guniang was too shy to just give you the soup so she asked Yuan to do it.” She glanced back, “Jiang-guniang asked me first, but I thought it was inappropriate. So I gave the mission to Yuan and let her put it in your room secretly. I didn’t expect...Gongzi, please don’t blame Jiang-guniang.”**

**“But A-Yuan told me-” Jin Zixuan started.**

**“Did she blush and deny it vaguely?” Wei Wuxian interrupted.**

**Jin Zixuan averted his gaze.**

A few more people laughed.

If they’d thought Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun’s misunderstanding was ridiculous, this was a thousand times more so!

Who taught these young masters about romance?

“All this fuss over soup?”

Qin Su frowned, “Isn’t the soup very important to them?”

She thought it was, but she hadn’t been there the whole viewing. Maybe she was wrong.

“It is,” Luo Qingyang confirmed, “It’s like...even though they’re on different paths, everyone needs to eat so that’s one place they can come together.”

Which was just another level of misunderstanding that made it all worse.

**Wei Wuxian scoffed, “MianMian, keep going.”**

**MianMian nodded, “Today, Jiang-guniang came across Jin-gongzi when she brought the soup over. Maybe our gongzi thought Jiang-guniang imitated Yuan, so he reminded Jiang-guniang...that they were no longer engaged and let her...he told her...”**

**“Told her what?” Wei Wuxian demanded.**

**“Not to steal and trample on others’ goodwill,” MianMian quoted, “Even if you come from a prestigious clan. Even if someone wasn’t born with riches, she has a nobler character than you. Please be self-dignified.”**

**Jiang Yanli started crying again.**

**“Self-dignified?” Wei Wuxian echoed, his grip tightening on Chenqing. MianMian moved out of his way as he approached, “Jin Zixuan, how dare you tell Shijie to be self-dignified?”**

Wen Qing closed her hand around Zidian before it could come to life, “He was just being an idiot.”

Many in the room found this incident amusing, but Wen Qing just found it sad.

Jin Zixuan tried to be better than the rest of his family. It was a struggle she was intimately familiar with. He tried to be fair and stand up for those born into lesser fortunes, but he went about it all wrong.

In the end, he would be just as much use as she was in preventing the tragedies done by their Sects.

“Are you alright?” Jiang Wanyin asked, distracting himself from his anger by focusing on her.

“Just...go easy on him,” Wen Qing requested, “It’s hard to break out of your family’s mindset.” She glanced at Nie Huaisang.

She couldn’t guarantee that Chifeng-Zun had months to live. She would have to inspect the damage first. That he was willing to consider giving it up at all was more than she expected. Half the battle was always getting the patient to accept treatment and to believe things could improve. It might not be enough in Huaisang’s eyes.

But it was an attempt by Chifeng-Zun to bridge the gap between them.

It wasn’t a bridge Huaisang could burn by taking rash action.

**“Wei-gongzi,” A Jin disciple spoke up, “Our gongzi actually did nothing. You misunderstood him.”**

**The other Jin disciples agreed, “It was a mistake.”**

**“Mistake?” Wei Wuxian repeated, then drew his fist back and punched Jin Zixuan in the chest. The young man flew back into his desk.**

**The Jin disciples drew their swords, but Wei Wuxian turned around and brought Chenqing to his lips. With a few notes, he sent out a wave of resentment that knocked the Jin disciples down.**

**Jin Zixuan rose and faced an angry Wei Wuxian, earning another punch to the face.**

**Seeing that Jin Zixuan wasn’t protecting himself, MianMian threw herself between them again, “Wei-gongzi.”**

That was hardly an attack. Wei Wuxian restrained himself to just his fists with some resentment behind it to give it the power it would have had if he still had a golden core.

He used Chenqing only when he would have been outnumbered.

“You were just going to let Wei Wuxian beat you up?” Nie Mingjue asked.

“I was the one in the wrong,” Jin Zixuan grimaced.

“You couldn’t have just apologized?” Huaisang rolled his eyes, “Honestly, how have you survived without MianMian?”

Jiang Wanyin snorted, “He has A-Jie now so he’s less stupid.”

“I’m sure we will see more reminders of my son’s foolishness,” Jin Guangshan smiled, and Nie Mingjue fought back the desire to punch it off his face, “He has much to learn.”

As though there was anything he could learn from Jin Guangshan that could be beneficial. Jin Zixuan was married with a child. He’d fought in a war. He was older than Jiang Wanyin, who had cemented his position as Sect Leader and ran the Jiang Sect with no difficulties of his own making.

Still, Nie Mingjue plastered on a smile of his own, “You’ll have to pass the reins on eventually.”

Sect Leader Yao laughed, “Not now, of course. Jin Zixuan’s just had a son. Let him adjust to parenthood first!”

How long would that be? Until Jin Rulan could hold a sword himself?

Nie Mingjue chuckled darkly. Jin Guangshan wouldn’t be Sect Leader when his grandson learned to walk. His karma would catch up to him by then.

**Jiang Yanli grabbed his sleeve, “A-Xian.”**

**Wei Wuxian’s fist remained raised to strike again.**

**Lan Wangji stormed into the tent and grabbed it, “Wei Ying, calm down.”**

**That seemed to break through his rage. He nervously turned to Lan Wangji, then turned and walked out of the tent.**

Lan Wangji added that to the evidence of his presence being helpful to Wei Ying.

He had the same effect Jiang Yanli did when Wei Ying fought Jin Zixuan in the Cloud Recesses. He didn’t stop instantly, but he managed to regain control of himself and leave the situation.

It was the same scene, just slightly different. There were no guardians to scold him. Uncle couldn’t make Wei Ying kneel. There wasn’t even an engagement at risk. As long as Jin Zixuan knew he was wrong he wouldn’t pull his forces from the war effort.

Really, the worst damage done was to Wei Ying’s reputation.

“That wasn’t nearly as bad as rumors made it seem,” Sect Leader Ouyang said.

“They made Wei Wuxian sound out of control,” Sect Leader Qin hummed, “Obviously, there are those who can control him.”

A few glances were shot his way, but he didn’t meet anyone’s gaze. He was still trying to come to terms with the power he held over Wei Ying. He knew he would do anything Wei Ying asked of him. When he’d visited the Burial Mounds he waited for his love to ask him to stay. He was bitterly disappointed when he was sent away.

Now, he wondered what would have happened if he prepared a counteroffer. If he had once again asked Wei Ying to return to Gusu with him when he ran into Wei Ying and the Wen Remnants at Qionggqi Pass. If he asked Wei Ying to trust him and Xichen to protect the innocent.

Lan Wangji shouldn’t be waiting. He should take the initiative.

**Nie Mingjue paced in his tent, “Xichen, the map of Qishan has information about the Yin Iron. It’s confidential. How did you get it?”**

**“The QishanWen is as hard as an iron cask, but it still can be permeated by water,” Lan Xichen replied vaguely, “It took a few months, so even when there were minor mistakes, they got in.” Lan Xichen moved to his side, “Please allow me to report the map painter later, but I have observed the map for several days and it is accurate.”**

**“Otherwise I wouldn’t dare give it to you directly,” Lan Xichen assured him.**

**“Anyways,” Nie Mingjue dismissed that topic, “You never told me, after Cloud Recesses was burnt down, where on earth did you go? And who saved you?”**

**Lan Xichen looked away, “Sure enough, Mingjue-xiong is thoughtful.”**

**“So the map painter and your rescuer are the same person,” Nie Mingjue confirmed.**

“You didn’t guess it was me?” Jin Guangyao asked.

It looked like all the pieces were there.

Who knew to go and rescue Er-ge? Who was free at that time? Er-ge had only written to Da-ge. With the attack on Qinghe, no Nie Sect disciples could be spared for a rescue attempt. Hanguang-Jun returned on his own and was accounted for afterwards. Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian returned to Yunmeng, but by then it was too late to assist either.

Da-ge had assumed he would go back to the Jin Sect. Jin Zixuan already told him that wasn’t the case.

“What reason did you have to be loyal to us?” Da-ge asked, “You were kicked out of both the Jin and Nie Sects. If I had thought you joined the Wen Sect, it wasn’t as a spy.”

“My reasons...” Jin Guangyao trailed off, “Er-ge was kind to me, and every kindness should be returned.”

It was the Wen Sect's saying. Like most sayings, it had morphed over time. Every kindness should be returned, and so should every insult. Then find a way to take everything as an insult so they could enact vengeance on anyone.

"Wen Ruohan believed I wanted to return every hurt done to me, but he underestimated the kindness of one man," Jin Guangyao finished.

He didn't admit that he'd had backup plans for if the Sunshot Campaign failed. Unless Er-ge failed in battle, he would have been relatively safe whether the allied Sects succeeded or failed. It may not have been the most dignified of lives, but it would have been a life.

Luckily, those plans never had to come to fruition.

**"It's not that I don't want to tell you," Lan Xichen evaded, "It's just that the Sunshot Campaign is still unfinished. This person has a secret identity. Without his permission, I dare not share his identity." Nie Mingjue nodded, "So I hope that you, Mingjue-xiong," Lan Xichen bowed, "Don't blame me please."**

Nie Mingjue stopped him, **"Ay, you are grateful and honest. How can I blame you? Of course I believe you."** Meeting his gaze, he nodded encouragingly.

**Lan Xichen nodded back.**

Nie Mingjue sighed and turned away, **"Besides, the map is precise. That asshole put three Yin Irons in three parts at crucial sites. Not only does my fate seem hard to predict, even you..."**

**"This campaign is making us fight with our backs against the wall," Lan Xichen comforted, "For every one of us, we have no way back."**

**"Right," Nie Mingjue agreed, "So let's work together. It doesn't matter whether I succeed in killing that bastard or not, we will launch the general attack in seven days, and storm into Nightless City."**

There was nothing but awed silence.

What could be said in the face of Chifeng-Zun's determination to win?

There really was no question who contributed the most to the Sunshot Campaign.

Or who contributed the least.

**They each led their groups into battle. The enemy was more focused on spreading its poison, in turning allies into enemies. They were also stronger and more brutal.**

"How did you make it to Qishan?" Lan Qiren frowned.

"Ah..." Xichen trailed off.

He understood regardless. He wouldn't like the answer.

Which meant this was all a trap.

**Jiang Cheng, Wei Wuxian, and Lan Wangji ran into Lan Xichen on the road. They greeted each other, but Lan Xichen focused on his brother, “Wangji, when we were back in the city we came across Wen Ruohan’s puppets. Now they may have flanked our rear. Presumably, they are close to us.”**

**“So are those following us,” Lan Wangji said.**

**“Now there are pursuing forces after two armies,” Lan Xichen worried, and looked off in one direction, “It seems, now, there is only one way to go.”**

**They glanced towards the path.**

**“Nightless City,” Lan Wangji stated.**

**Lan Xichen nodded.**

This was also different from the retellings.

Instead of storming Qishan, the allied forces were led there. Instead of a courageous attack, it was the only way left to go without facing annihilation.

Many eyes turned to the leaders.

Zewu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun were forbidden by their Sects to gossip. Their Sect also didn’t glorify war, so why would they spread such foreboding tales? Then there was Sect Leader Jiang, who was very tight-lipped on any matter regarding the Wen Sect. Considering Wei Wuxian’s defection, no one pressed him for details.

Nie Mingjue was already missing from this group, likely captured in his attempt to kill Wen Ruohan. He was also a general who travelled with the main bulk of the army. He didn’t see battle the way others did.

Then there were the Jin, who were unsurprisingly absent from the main group as well.

**“I am afraid that those three groups of puppets don’t want to kill us,” Wei Wuxian shared, “Instead, they want to corner us in Nightless City.”**

**“Wen Ruohan tempted us to go deliberately,” Lan Xichen lowered his voice, “And Mingjue-xiong disappeared without a trace.” He shook his head.**

**“The appointed time hasn’t come yet,” Jiang Cheng interjected, “Attacking Qishan recklessly like this may destroy Nie-zongzhu’s plan.”**

**Lan Xichen looked puzzled.**

**“Now we are in a dilemma,” Wei Wuxian said darkly, “We are trapped. Going to Nightless City is not up to us.”**

**“So we have a rest here and attack Nightless City,” Jiang Cheng decided, leaving before Lan Xichen could agree.**

**Wei Wuxian hesitated to follow him, “Zewu-Jun, who gave you the map?”**

**That brought a small smile to his face, “An old friend did.”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, then followed his brother.**

**Lan Wangji waited for him to go, “Xiongzhang.”**

**“Wangji,” Lan Xichen cut him off, “You don’t have to ask me about his identity. He is a friend, not an enemy. Even today, it is he who tempts us into Nightless City. He must have a reason.”**

**They both turned to where they could see Nightless City off in the distance.**

**“This was your plan?” Nie Huaisang asked.**

**San-ge paused, then nodded, “Yes.”**

**There were whispers around the room about how risky it was.**

**“It was necessary,” San-ge explained, “We were never going to get into Qishan unless Wen Ruohan allowed you to. It was a gamble, but it was the only chance the Sunshot Campaign had of succeeding. A quick, decisive victory.”**

**“With Da-ge as the distraction,” Nie Huaisang narrowed his eyes.**

**The logical part of his brain understood it was the only distraction that could keep Wen Ruohan from immediately springing his trap. Da-ge killed Wen Xu. That was worthy of a long, drawn out punishment.**

**It was also a way to ensure San-ge was in the room. If he infiltrated the Wen Sect by claiming he desired revenge on the Nie Sect, then of course Wen Ruohan would delight in seeing his favored servant get that revenge. Which meant San-ge could draw it out as long as he needed to get Er-ge, or Hanguang-Jun, or Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian there.**

**It’s what Nie Huaisang would have done if their fortunes were reversed.**

**But still...**

**“Did you risk anything?” The bitter question slipped from his lips without his permission.**

**It was his brother who suffered.**

**San-ge didn’t act until Wei Wuxian did. San-ge had no way of anticipating the effectiveness of the Stygian Tiger Amulet. If Wei Wuxian hadn’t pulled a miracle at the end, would San-ge have stuck his sword through Wen Ruohan’s back?**



“Not as much as others,” San-ge answered slowly, “But I suppose I was the only one thinking of life after defeat.”

“There wasn’t a life for us after defeat,” Da-ge growled.

“Not for you,” San-ge closed his eyes, “But I had some sway over Wen Ruohan. I could have convinced him Huaisang wasn’t a threat. That Jin Guangshan could control his son. That as long as we had one Lan brother, we could control the other. That as long as we had Wen Qionglin, we could control Wen Qing, and she could marry into the Jiang Sect.”

“If a quick, decisive victory was impossible, I was prepared to play the long game,” San-ge looked down, “Surviving can be humiliating, but I prefer even the lowest of circumstances to death.”

Unlike Wen Ruohan, who would have enjoyed seeing them bowed low more than their deaths.

“Don’t act like playing both sides is honorable,” Madam Jin snapped.

San-ge’s eyes just flickered to her husband, who coughed, “One shouldn’t put all their eggs into one basket.”

**Nie Mingjue stood before Wen Ruohan in his throne room.**

**Wen Ruohan held the pieces of the Yin Iron, “Nie Mingjue, you claimed my Yin Iron was a wicked trick. Today, I am going to show you the righteous man and how powerful our wicked tricks are.”**

**Wen Ruohan sent out a burst of energy, laughing as Nie Mingjue’s pain forced him to his knees.**

**Meng Yao walked by him and bowed to Wen Ruohan, turning slowly to his former master, “Nie-zongzhu, long time no see.” Meng Yao smiled darkly.**

**“You...” Nie Mingjue growled, “It’s you.”**

**Meng Yao tutted, crouching down in front of him, “I would never have expected that you could look so miserable today.” He brushed his shoulder.**

**“Get lost!” Nie Mingjue shoved him away.**

**Meng Yao laughed, “Do you think you’re a king?” He rose and addressed the other disciples, “Look closely. This is the Sun Palace.”**

**“What palace?” One Nie disciple asked defiantly, “This is just the den of Wen dogs.”**

**Meng Yao pulled his sword and ruthlessly cut him down.**

**“Jackal! Kill me too if you can!” Another shouted.**

**“With pleasure,” Meng Yao lifted his sword and stabbed him through the heart,  
“Anyone else feel like saying that word?”**

Jin Zixuan shuddered, unsure how much of this was an act and how much of this was just how his brother would act if he had the power to get revenge on all those who slighted him.

No, this had Wen Ruohan for an audience. This had to be performative.

“Are you trying to act like Wen Chao?” Jiang Wanyin asked.

“Wen Chao acted like Wen Ruohan wanted him to act,” Guangyao kept looking down, “He was just useless.”

No one asked if there was another way.

Guangyao couldn't hesitate at such a crucial part. Wen Ruohan might have trusted him, but that didn't mean there weren't still doubts. Especially where the Nie Sect was concerned. Wen Zhuliu had seen him take a sword for Chifeng-Zun. The only way to not arouse Wen Ruohan's suspicions was to be unflinchingly brutal.

Guangyao had already betrayed Chifeng-Zun once. How brutal was it for that betrayal to happen again?

**Meanwhile, the combined forces of the Lan and Jiang had reached Nightless City. They fought their way inside, right up to the steps of Wen Ruohan's palace. The Sect Leaders and their brothers fought impressively, avoiding injury. Wei Wuxian fought only with his flute, not even playing it, just using it as a sword.**

**The scene went back to Nie Mingjue, who summoned the strength to rise, “Jackal.”**

“So it really was at the same time,” Lan Xichen whispered.

They reached the palace only because Wen Ruohan was too busy with Da-ge.

No. It wasn't Wen Ruohan doing anything. Wen Ruohan was just watching. It was A-Yao who controlled that scene, who dragged it out.

“All according to plan,” A-Yao replied.

Lan Xichen was tempted to ask how. There were too many factors beyond his control, how could he have anticipated so many things correctly? This only made him more aware of the plan Huaisang had exposed. Would he really have managed to get rid of Jin Zixuan and Wei Wuxian?

**Meng Yao turned to face him, “Nie-zongzhu, please have a look at this.” It was Baxia, “Nie-zongzhu, I've held Baxia many times before.” He dragged his hand along the blade, “Isn't it a little too late for you to be angry now?”**

**“Put your hand away,” Nie Mingjue growled.**

**“Your blade can barely be deemed first-class,” Meng Yao insulted, “Nevertheless, compared to your father’s blade, it’s a bit inferior. Why not have a guess how many times Wen-zongzhu hit it until it broke?” Meng Yao stepped closer, “I remember that when your father received his broken blade, he died,” Their faces were inches away, “Of wrath.”**

Jin Guangyao understood now what would have happened.

It was a good thing they didn’t get that far.

Killing Da-ge was never part of the plan. He’d long convinced Wen Ruohan to make him into a living puppet. But if he’d broken the saber and triggered a qi deviation fueled by the saber spirit’s resentment...

Could Da-ge have killed Wen Ruohan in that state? Would his uncontrolled rage have been able to withstand the power of the Yin Iron?

**Outside, the battle continued. Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian stayed together. Lan Xichen and Jiang Cheng held their own.**

**The fighting seemed endless.**

Inseparable on the battlefield.

Jiang Yanli only wished they could be so close off of it as well. She knew A-Xian was only conserving his energy so he could act in a critical moment, but it still displayed so much trust in Hanguang-Jun.

Maybe this was his way of letting Hanguang-Jun help him.

**Nie Mingjue shoved Meng Yao.**

**Meng Yao returned the kick, knocking Nie Mingjue to the ground, “How dare you be so rude in front of Wen-zongzhu!” Meng Yao shouted.**

**Nie Mingjue pushed himself into the air to strike at him. Meng Yao fell to the ground, and Wen Ruohan prevented him from being hit again. As he was pulled back, Nie Mingjue caught a Wen disciple and threw him at Wen Ruohan. With this distraction, he summoned Baxia back to his hand and took down the Wen disciples with one sweep.**

**Nie Mingjue spat blood, roared, and moved to strike Wen Ruohan.**

**He wasn’t successful.**

**Meng Yao watched him fall to the floor, unconscious, then forced himself to his feet.**

It was impossible to guess what Jin Guangyao genuinely planned.

Nie Mingjue wondered if this was his younger sworn brother’s way of letting him try to carry out his mission. Jin Guangyao had taken a sword to the gut and managed to walk away. His

strike wasn't hard enough to keep him down that long, yet he stayed on the ground until his attack failed.

Playing both sides indeed. It was cowardly. It was despicable.

It was very much like Jin Guangyao.

**Wen Ruohan rose from his throne. Meng Yao met him in the middle, "I'm so incompetent to bother Wen-zongzhu."**

**"Trash," Wen Ruohan dismissed, standing over Nie Mingjue's body, "Did he kill Wen Xu?"**

**Meng Yao hesitated, but didn't answer.**

**"Things are getting interesting outside the palace," Wen Ruohan observed, "Meng Yao, this was your doing. Don't you want to see?" He threw the Yin Iron into an array. Meng Yao's eyes lit up.**

"This was your doing," Jin Guangshan repeated.

It wasn't an accusation. If anything, it was a compliment.

He'd known his bastard was competent, but the skill he displayed here astonished Jin Guangshan.

It also made him doubt his bastard's loyalty. There Wen Ruohan stood, convinced by his servant to bring all the pieces of the Yin Iron together and to allow the enemy within his gates, completely unaware of the betrayal that was about to happen. He saw his servant be viscous with a smile, not knowing that aggression would turn on him.

For the first time, he understood what his wife complained about.

Jin Guangyao was dangerous.

Jin Guangshan thought he controlled him, but hadn't Chifeng-Zun? Hadn't Wen Ruohan? Hadn't they both been wrong?

**Outside, the fighting died down. There was a sudden lull in the battle.**

**Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji stood together, as did Lan Xichen and Jiang Cheng. The survivors formed a ring together in the middle.**

**"Wei-gongzi, what should we do now? Shall we march over there?" A Jiang disciple asked.**

**They watched as energy descended from the palace, disintegrating four of the surviving disciples.**

**"There are so many puppets!" A Lan disciple panicked.**

**An army of puppets marched towards them from both sides, trapping them within Nightless City.**

MianMian wrapped an arm around Qin Su.

A part of her was relieved she'd missed the final battle. She wasn't sure she could have survived this.

"It will be over soon," MianMian whispered in comfort, "Wei Wuxian saves the day."

As he always seemed to do for those in need.

**"Given the quantity of those puppets, we know Wen Ruohan has hurt many people," Jiang Cheng said, facing those coming from the gate.**

**"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian faced the ones coming from the palace, "What method can we take now to escape?"**

**"Fight," Lan Wangji answered.**

**Surrounded, they prepared to fight.**

**And fight they did. For so long, as more and more died.**

It seemed hopeless.

The Nie, Lan, and Jiang had given nearly everything, just for the trap to spring at an inopportune moment.

And of course, the Jin Sect was nowhere to be seen.

Jin Zixuan bit back the question in his mind. Did Guangyao deliberately delay them? Why weren't they forced to Qishan like everyone else? Did he purposely keep them from helping?

Or was it Wen Ruohan's decision? Did Wen Ruohan hope to win over his father by returning him unharmed from the war?

He desperately wanted to ask, but he didn't want to damage his brother's reputation more than it already was by seeing him undercover. Nor did he want to give his mother any more ammunition to use in her war against Guangyao. She was only silent now because Guangyao was the biggest contributor to the war effort from the Jin Sect.

She would love to blame him for their lack of achievement, and he couldn't raise that question unless he was more certain of the answer.

**It seemed like Jiang Cheng, Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian and Lan Xichen were the only ones left standing. Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian remained together throughout it all.**

**Wei Wuxian lifted himself up to the top of a statue. He looked out over the battlefield and shared a regretful look with Lan Wangji. He lifted Chenqing to his lips and began**

**to play, letting the resentment wash over him. He summoned more resentment. It hovered around him, waiting for a purpose.**

**The allied disciples kept fighting, Lan Wangji sparing a glance in Wei Wuxian's directions with every other kill.**

**Jiang Cheng found himself forced back, stuck in a deadlock.**

**That's when Wei Wuxian sent the resentment out.**

This...this was the true power of the Yiling Patriarch.

One man who could topple an army.

One man that wouldn't unless he was given no other choice.

Or they could just never bring together an army to fight him. That was always an option. Considering he had yet to choose evil for selfish reasons, it was becoming an increasingly favorable option.

**The enemy froze as Wei Wuxian's resentment poured into them. Then they turned on each other. This stopped an attack on Lan Xichen and Jiang Cheng, who both retreated to observe better.**

**Lan Wangji placed himself at the bottom of the stairs, watching the puppets fight each other.**

**Inside the palace, Wen Ruohan tried to summon the Yin Iron to himself. He failed, "Why isn't the Yin Iron working? Who is it? Who?" He stuck his arms to the side.**

**Realizing it wouldn't work, he quickly left the palace. Meng Yao watched him disappear, then pulled his sword out and followed him.**

Many sighs of relief were let out.

Hearing Lianfeng-Zun talk, it was almost as though he wouldn't carry out the assassination. But he was armed the entire time, and chose not to let Wen Ruohan know that.

"Do you...still carry that blade, Lianfeng-Zun?" Sect Leader Yao wondered.

It was flexible by design. Truly an assassin's weapon. They all knew Lianfeng-Zun didn't carry a traditional sword in his hand, but that didn't mean this wasn't hidden somewhere on his body. Always prepared to strike should he ever genuinely be threatened.

"Do I have a need to arm myself?" Lianfeng-Zun replied.

Which wasn't a yes or no.

**Lan Wangji, Lan Xichen, and Jiang Cheng all noticed Wen Ruohan's emergence.**

**“It’s you,” Wen Ruohan said.**

**Wei Wuxian stopped playing and turned to face him. He smiled, “Wen-zongzhu. I’m happy to meet you.”**

**“Where did you get your shard of Yin Iron?” Wen Ruohan demanded.**

**“I died once,” Wei Wuxian replied, “We, of course, came from hell.”**

They weren’t sure which event he equated with death.

Was it when he passed out for days in the Xuanwu cave? Or did he consider himself dead when he gave up his core for his brother and doomed himself to demonic cultivation? Or was it when he was tossed in the Burial Mounds and learned to master demonic cultivation?

**Wen Ruohan narrowed his eyes.**

**Wei Wuxian glanced at the battlefield, “Wen-zongzhu. My spiritual tool has just been refined. No one has seen it yet.”**

**“What is it?” Wen Ruohan asked suspiciously, “How can it control the Yin Iron? Did Xue Yang give it to you? What is it?”**

**Wei Wuxian just looked away again, before lifting his hands. Some energy drifted into his hands, the resentment clinging to it fading away as he spoke, “Wen-zongzhu. This spiritual tool is not called Yin Iron. It is called Stygian Tiger Amulet.”**

**Wen Ruohan stuck out a hand to draw him closer.**

**Wei Wuxian tossed his weapons up into the air and was dragged closer.**

They should have moved faster.

Lan Xichen had just stood there next to Jiang Wanyin. Both of them were too dumbfounded by the sudden turn of events to take advantage of them. As soon as the puppets were taken care of they should have gone to Wei Wuxian’s side. They should have initiated a fight against Wen Ruohan.

Instead, they stood there as Wei Wuxian was choked.

If nothing else, Lan Xichen owed him a life debt. It shouldn’t have mattered how Wei Wuxian stopped the army. What mattered was that Lan Xichen came out of a hopeless situation alive, and Wei Wuxian was the one to thank for that.

**Wen Ruohan held him up by the neck, but it was too late. The Amulet was already letting out more energy, this time controlling the whole battlefield and forcing the puppets down.**

**Wei Wuxian smirked.**

**Lan Wangji started up the stairs.**

**Meng Yao made his move.**

**“Stygian Tiger Amulet...” Wen Ruohan muttered as he was stabbed through the back. He fell to the side, dead.**

**Wei Wuxian collapsed into Lan Wangji’s arms.**

**“Wei Ying!”**

**They both looked up as Wen Ruohan’s body fell to the side, revealing Meng Yao. His hand shook as he dropped the blade.**

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji repeated as he passed out.**

A quick, decisive victory.

But at what cost?

So many had expected the victory to be fulfilling. They came to watch Wen Ruohan’s downfall with their own eyes. Instead, they learned why their heroes seldom spoke of this battle.

Chifeng-Zun was tortured to unconsciousness, unknowingly used as a distraction.

Wei Wuxian poured everything into stopping Wen Ruohan’s Yin Iron, and would have had his neck snapped if it weren’t for the timely actions of Lianfeng-Zun.

Lianfeng-Zun, whose role in the war was far more complicated than a spy turned assassin. Just how deep had he gone to win Wen Ruohan’s trust? Obviously the conflicted expression on his face wasn’t from killing. He’d killed others with no change in expression. Or was he just conflicted about finally choosing a side?

Not that it was much of a choice in the end. There was an obvious winner by then.

If Lianfeng-Zun hadn’t struck, Hanguang-Jun would have.

Anything for the love of his life, who he cradled in his arms next to the cooling corpse of the enemy.

Then stood Zewu-Jun and Sandu Shengshou, almost alone amongst the corpses of friends and enemies alike. The blood stained robes made it hard to tell who belonged to which Sect. The cracks along their faces made it even harder to tell who possibly survived, and who was long dead.

All this for what? Because one man decided his power only had meaning as long as he was the only one to wield it? Because one man wanted to burn their world to ashes and rebuild it in his image?



They'd never know for certain, but no reason could justify such carnage.

**This was the sight Jin Zixuan arrived to. He ran further into Nightless City, searching for survivors among the countless dead on the ground. Lan Xichen and Jiang Cheng moved to meet him, but in the distance, he could see Meng Yao and Lan Wangji.**

**“The Wen Sect is dead!” A Jin disciple cheered, “We won!”**

**The other Jin disciples took up the chant.**

**Jiang Cheng managed a small smile. Lan Xichen closed his eyes and let out a deep breath, “The sun has finally set.”**

The Wen Sect had fallen, replaced by two powers.

The Jin Sect rose. They'd lost the least in the war. While everyone else was focused on recovery, they started on expansion.

The Yiling Patriarch also rose.

Who was good and who was evil?

## Chapter End Notes

First chapter to my TGCF fic is posted. I kinda want to hear opinions for secondary ships, so if you have them please go to that story and leave them. Thank you to all who have supported both stories!

Also, to whoever wrote an article about the best cooking shows on Netflix and put Food Wars on it, I hope you're happy. You convinced my mom to watch it, and now my parents have binged the two seasons available on there.

Back to this, how do y'all think this story should end?

# Ghost Town

## Chapter Summary

Except we made the ghosts that haunt us

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The war was over.

Now came the aftermath.

Jiang Yanli barely remembered the first few days. She'd come to Qishan with the rest of the supporting forces and immediately focused on the injured. When she wasn't there she was tending to A-Xian in his private room.

The only time she rested was when A-Cheng came back to watch over A-Xian. Her brother took on the tough responsibility of observing the funeral rites for the dead. It made sense now that she knew about Wen Qing. Of course he wanted to see to the dead to ensure she wasn't among them. And there were so many dead.

Both of them didn't know what happened politically those first few days. A-Cheng was rarely included in the meetings between Zewu-Jun, Chifeng-Zun, and Jin Guangshan. At the time, they'd been grateful they could spend more time with their unconscious brother.

Now, she wondered if it was deliberate. If they'd already decided A-Xian was too powerful and the Jiang Sect didn't need more power.

**Nie Mingjue woke up in Lan Xichen's lap. He smiled, "Xichen."**

**Lan Xichen smiled back, "You're finally awake."**

If San-ge wanted to kill Da-ge, then he wouldn't have woken up. Or he'd have required immediate medical attention rather than just using Er-ge as a pillow.

Nie Huaisang tentatively decided to let this be. This was between his brother and his brother's sworn brother.

His focus should be on Jin Guangshan.

Besides, as long as his brother looked at Er-ge that way, there was no way he would approve of him arranging the death of San-ge. Er-ge would never allow it.

He stiffened, "Jiang-xiong, do any of your disciples have writing supplies?"

"What do you think?" Jiang Cheng crossed his arms.

Nie Huaisang rolled his eyes, "So unprepared."

"Here, Nie-gongzi," One of his disciples passed it up.

He kept it short and simple. Da-ge was willing to give up his saber soon. He didn't clarify soon, not if it would push San-ge to committing patricide in some weird version of penance. If he actually felt guilty about any of this, which was again, not Nie Huaisang's problem.

**Nie Mingjue noticed Meng Yao kneeling with Baxia. Meng Yao rose and retreated as Nie Mingjue pushed himself up. With Lan Xichen's assistance, he got to his feet.**

**"Hand me the blade," Nie Mingjue demanded as Meng Yao averted his gaze.**

**"Nie-zongzhu," Meng Yao offered Baxia, "Let me explain."**

**Nie Mingjue took it and swung it back to strike.**

**Lan Xichen stepped between them, "Mingjue-xiong."**

The first time Chifeng-Zun raised his blade as though to execute Meng Yao, he'd stopped himself.

The second time looked much more sincere.

While it was obvious now why there was such tension between the three sworn brothers, they couldn't help but wonder how that ceremony came together. There was simply too much hurt and betrayal between the oldest and the youngest.

Did they both care for Zewu-Jun that much?

**Nie Mingjue stabbed Baxia into the ground.**

**"Nie-zongzhu, your wounds are still fresh," Meng Yao protested.**

**"Xichen, this is none of your business," Nie Mingjue pressed a hand to his chest, "When you were killing the Nie disciples-"**

**"I had no choice at that moment," Meng Yao protested.**

**"You had no choice?" Nie Mingjue growled, "It was always your choice whether to kill them or not."**

**"Was it really up to me?" Meng Yao asked, "Nie-zongzhu, if we could have changed out situations-"**

**"We couldn't!" Nie Mingjue interrupted, lifting Baxia again.**

**Meng Yao gripped Lan Xichen's robes tightly. Lan Xichen raised his voice, "Mingjue-xiong!"**

**“Xichen! Get out of the way!”**

**“Calm down!”**

**Nie Mingjue physically shoved Lan Xichen out of the way.**

**“Zewu-Jun,” Meng Yao closed his eyes, not defending himself.**

**He didn't have to, as Lan Xichen blocked the blow meant to kill him, “Mingjue-xiong.”**

**“Would you have let him do it?” Jin Zixuan asked.**

His brother accepted his death in the Unclean Realm, but this was different. This time he had killed far more, and his justifications were far more dubious. Still, for someone who could be vicious and deceitful, he couldn't tell if Guangyao was acting here. Did he know Zewu-Jun would protect him if he acted weak?

Or did some part of him accept this as long as it was from Chifeng-Zun? Meng Yao had been a trusted deputy in the Unclean Realm. Surely there was some lingering gratitude for the promotion, which obviously was contested if that Captain was any indication.

**“I couldn't do anything to stop him,” Guangyao answered.**

He barely tried to. Was it out of any lingering gratitude for the kindness shown to him?

Guangyao spied and killed for Zewu-Jun out of gratitude for kindness. What was so different about Chifeng-Zun?

**Lan Xichen calmed himself, “Mingjue-xiong. What are you doing this for?”**

**“What for? Back then, after he was kicked out of Qinghe, I was wondering why I couldn't find him,” Nie Mingjue thundered, “It turns out that he became a Wen underling and has been helping the tyrant in Nightless City.”**

**“Mingjue-xiong,” Lan Xichen repeated, “Do you know who gave you the Wen Sect's map at that time? Do you know who was our source of information all this time?” Nie Mingjue wavered, “Today, I received A-Yao's message so I could make it to the Palace with Wangji. I was right to have trusted him.”**

**“It was him who schemed to let Wen Ruohan's guard down and seized the opportunity to kill Wen Ruohan,” Lan Xichen explained.**

**“Him?” Nie Mingjue slowly retracted Baxia.**

Lan Xichen shouldn't have thought the matter was so simple.

Killing Wen Ruohan had been Da-ge's obsession for over a decade. It concerned him how much of his life had revolved around vengeance. He'd thought Wen Ruohan's death would have been enough to convince Da-ge to put aside his other grievances with A-Yao. He thought they could finally move out from under the Wen Sect's shadow.

He should have realized neither of his sworn brothers were the type to move on easily.

Lan Xichen himself didn't understand how they felt until now.

A paperman landed on his table, holding a little note rolled up. It set it down and waved.

It had to be Huaisang. Just another thing he picked up from Wei Wuxian.

He accepted the note, and the talisman waited patiently. It wasn't a long message. It only told him that Da-ge was willing to stop his cultivation path for a few conditions.

A-Yao frowned at it, "What conditions?"

Lan Xichen didn't know. He presumed that was between the Nie brothers.

**"Mingjue-xiong, after the incident at Qinghe, A-Yao always felt remorseful, so he was afraid to run into you," Lan Xichen continued, "I was escaping Cloud Recesses and he saved my life. Later on, he managed to sneak into the QishanWen, approached Wen Ruohan, and then wrote me letters secretly."**

**"At first, I didn't know who was sending me letters. Then I realized who it was after spotting a few hints in his letters," Lan Xichen kept looking between the two, "Didn't you tell Mingjue-xiong all of this?"**

**"Zewu-Jun," Meng Yao replied, "You saw it. In that sort of situation, even if I had said it, Nie-zongzhu wouldn't have believed me." He gripped Lan Xichen's sleeve, then stepped aside.**

There were only two people Jin Guangyao would accept death from.

Da-ge and Er-ge.

For Da-ge, it was complicated. At first, he had respected him. It was a rare man to support a bastard over those of established lineages. Then he realized that Nie Mingjue seemed oblivious to the continued difficulties he faced after promotion. He was so arrogant to think being his trusted second was enough for him to be respected.

When the Captain continued to bully him, when a good number of the disciples did as well...when the only person who genuinely seemed to like him was Huaisang, he figured out the mighty Chifeng-Zun never would have noticed at all if it hadn't been for that day in the caves.

It made his kindness seem a lot more like pity. Jin Guangyao wasn't sure he would accept death from him anymore, now that he saw more of his hypocrisy, but Da-ge wasn't as set against him as he used to be either.

Er-ge was just too kind.

Jin Guangyao didn't think he could live in a world where he wasn't worth even a little of his kindness.

**Meng Yao went down on his knees, “Nie-zongzhu, what I just did here was to gain his trust and to cover my identity. But I did hurt you and said awful things. I knew you still grieved what happened to your father and I purposefully brought it up.”**

**“You shouldn’t kneel to me,” Nie Mingjue turned away, “But to those who were killed by you.”**

**“Wen Ruohan was atrocious,” Meng Yao said, “If there is something that is against his will, he would go insane. If I wanted to be trusted by him, when he was insulted I couldn’t stay silent.”**

**“Fair enough,” Nie Mingjue looked down on him, “It seems you’ve been quite used to barking for him.”**

**“Mingjue-xiong,” Lan Xichen interjected, “While working in Qishan, A-Yao couldn’t help doing undesirable actions. I believe when he was doing such things, deep in his heart,” Baxia trembled again, “He must have been-”**

**Nie Mingjue swung his blade, but only cut through a lantern.**

**Meng Yao kept his eyes closed for a moment longer, then turned to look at it.**

**With that final warning, Nie Mingjue left and Meng Yao could sit back.**

**And so he escaped again.**

**Madam Jin shared a look with her husband. Finally, he seemed to grasp just how dangerous his bastard was.**

**A little too late.**

**Now he’d dug his claws into A-Xuan. He’d found the only way out. A-Xuan was finally standing up for himself, trying to use the approval he’d earned during the war to make a play for Sect Leader. It might even work.**

**Especially if he thought he had the bastard’s support.**

**When Wei Wuxian woke up, he found himself in a bed. His sister was waiting next to him, “A-Xian,” She moved up onto the bed, “A-Xian, you’re awake. How do you feel? Do you feel any discomfort?”**

**“Shijie,” He stared at her, “What time is it now?”**

**Jiang Yanli smiled, “You’ve been asleep for three days.” He sat up, and she half-scolded him, “A-Xian.”**

**A slightly more pleasant sight to wake up to than Nie Mingjue got.**

**Not that it was unpleasant to see Xichen. Ever. It was simply that he was the one who told Xichen that Meng Yao was a good, trustworthy person. They may have only interacted twice**

before Meng Yao went and saved his life, but maybe Xichen wouldn't have been so complimentary or attentive if Nie Mingjue hadn't mentioned him in a few letters.

It was unpleasant to realize he had, at one point, wanted Xichen and Meng Yao to be friends.

Just not like that. Not after he knew how duplicitous Meng Yao could be. Especially not when Meng Yao became Jin Guangyao.

He wished he'd just stayed unconscious and woken up to Huaisang. His younger brother would have sat on him and explained just who Jin Guangyao was before he could pull his saber out and do anything stupid. Then Xichen wouldn't have thought he needed to play mediator constantly.

Xichen wouldn't have stayed so close to Jin Guangyao if he didn't feel like he was making up for Nie Mingjue's rejection.

**"Three days?" He asked as he struggled to sit up, "Jiang Cheng? Lan Zhan?"**

**"Don't worry," Jiang Yanli assured him, "They're all safe."**

**Wei Wuxian brought his hand up to his chest, still looking uncertain.**

"Oh," Nie Huaisang sighed, "He thought we found out."

Jiang Cheng frowned, his hand coming up to his chest, "How did we not find out?"

He was unconscious for three days. Multiple healers came to see him. Sure, Jiang Cheng and A-Jie didn't let them stay for too long. There were already whispers that Wei Wuxian was too powerful. He didn't want anyone to kill him in his weakened state, but Hanguang-Jun came with a Lan healer in tow.

It was hard to tell him no. It was like when Wei Wuxian was missing, but somehow worse because he was there, he just wouldn't wake up.

Wen Qing shrugged.

"He was depleted of spiritual energy," Hanguang-Jun frowned, "Considering the power he used, it wasn't inexplicable."

Jiang Cheng should have figured it out.

**"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli gripped his arm, "The Wen Sect has been eliminated. There's nothing to worry about. The most important thing for you now is to rest. When you were in a coma these past few days, both A-Cheng and Lan-er-gongzi were very worried about you. Even Jin-zongzhu came to see you several times."**

**"Jin Guangshan?" Wei Wuxian clarified, looking disturbed.**

**"Jin-zongzhu rushed over from Lanling. He said he would take troops to chase the remaining evil of the Wen Sect," Jiang Yanli continued.**

**Wei Wuxian scoffed, “I didn’t see him during the Sunshot Campaign. Now he’s so enthusiastic about it.”**

**“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli scolded, “Being spiteful is not right.”**

**“Okay, Shijie,” Wei Wuxian sulked, then made to swing his legs around.**

He had every right to be spiteful.

Many in the room felt a similar stab of annoyance. It was obvious now who truly contributed to the Sunshot Campaign, and the rewards didn’t match the contributions.

Jin Guangshan didn’t deserve to be Chief Cultivator.

**She grabbed him, “You don’t need to get up now. Lan-er-gongzi said that you’ve spent too much spiritual energy using the amulet.” Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened, “Even if you woke up, you still have to rest for a few days.”**

**“Shijie,” Wei Wuxian looked her up and down, “You knew about it too?”**

**Jiang Yanli brushed his hair off his face, “I didn’t know my A-Xian has been so good, but you can’t use the amulet anymore.” He nodded in agreement, “Lan-er-gongzi said it could consume too much power and is bad for your temperament.”**

**“Lan-er-gongzi, Lan-er-gongzi, Lan-er-gongzi,” Wei Wuxian repeated, “Why do you keep mentioning him today? He’s a boring person,” Yet he was grinning, “He doesn’t talk much.”**

**“You’re being naughty again,” Jiang Yanli interjected, “These past few days, when you were in a coma, Lan-er-gongzi came every morning and evening and played for you to relax your mind and spirit. If he hadn’t done that, I’m afraid you wouldn’t have woken up so soon.”**

**Wei Wuxian’s smile faded.**

Wei Ying thought he knew.

Lan Wangji’s hands curled into fists. If there was ever a time for them to have found out, it should have been then. Jiang Wanyin and Jiang Yanli were overly cautious of anyone wanting to see their brother, and Lan Wangji had become...overprotective. He’d worried the healers would find something worse to condemn his beloved.

Instead, they could have unravelled all mysteries and gotten Wei Ying the help he needed.

Not that he was sure what he would have said. He would have waited for Wei Ying to wake up before demanding an explanation for his missing core.

Or maybe he would have lied to Jiang Yanli and stolen him away to Cloud Recesses. Some part of him knew Wei Ying wouldn’t use demonic cultivation against him, and if he’d known that was all he had...



Lan Wangji should have taken better care of him.

**There was a knock on the door. Jiang Yanli smiled, “That must be Lan-er-gongzi.”**

**Wei Wuxian once again looked alarmed, but he struggled into a better sitting position as Jiang Yanli let Lan Wangji in.**

**Lan Wangji’s eyes widened in surprise to find Wei Wuxian awake. Wei Wuxian averted his gaze nervously. Neither said anything as Jiang Yanli dismissed herself after thanking him.**

**They were both silent for a long moment, then Lan Wangji wordlessly set up his guqin and started playing.**

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian started, “Actually, I-”**

**“Be quiet,” Lan Wangji interrupted, “Concentrate.”**

**Wei Wuxian tapped the end of his nose, then drew his legs up to meditate. He listened to the music for the duration of the song. Lan Wangji occasionally glanced his way as his spiritual energy filled the room. At the end of his song, Wei Wuxian stretched his wrists, “Lan Zhan, I’m fine.”**

Lan Xichen let out a deep sigh.

The music couldn’t have helped much. There was no spiritual energy for it to boost. It might have relaxed him, given his mind more focus, but really that smile must have been for Wangji. Just another lie to try and convince him he was fine.

If he was fine, then Wei Wuxian could keep Wangji away.

Just like Da-ge did. For years he’d had him convinced he was fine, and Lan Xichen didn’t look closer into preventing his qi deviation.

For over a year now too, A-Yao convinced him everything was fine so he wouldn’t look closer.

There was something to be said about respecting others’ boundaries and not pushing where he wasn’t welcome, but if Lan Xichen had been a little more suspicious, a little more demanding...could he have gotten the truth earlier?

There was going to be a new Chief Cultivator once this was all said and done. It was highly likely people would expect him to step up. He had a milder temper than Da-ge, and he was older than Jiang Wanyin and Jin Zixuan.

How could he dare take the position when he was so easily blinded?

How could he ever trust another with that power either?

**Lan Wangji walked over to him, “Three more days are needed.”**

**Wei Wuxian stood, “I’m really fine. Look.” He stretched and bent his arms.**

**“Exorcise evil. Ease the mind,” Lan Wangji quoted, “Don’t be neglectful.”**

**“Exorcise evil?” Wei Wuxian repeated incredulously, “I don’t need an exorcism. I’ve just spent too much spiritual power.” Wei Wuxian’s expression fell, and he brought a hand up to his chest.**

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji brought him back.**

So it still bothered him.

Not enough to lose control like before, at least not yet.

More in the room were dreading the truth behind Qiongqi Pass. They’d been misinformed about Wen Qing. They’d wrongly assumed that Wei Wuxian’s Amulet came from Xue Yang’s Yin Iron. The Jin Sect’s contribution to the war was largely exaggerated. As were the heroics of the others. The war wasn’t glorious, it was desperate.

They wouldn’t be surprised if Wei Wuxian’s crimes were more rumor than truth.

After all, now that they were suspicious, they noticed that none of the guards were there. Why wouldn’t they come to lend more truth to Wei Wuxian’s condemnation?

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian sobered, “Do you also think the Stygian Tiger Amulet is evil and can disturb people’s minds?” He paused, “But in this world, is there really such an undetectable thing that can change people’s minds from loyalty to treachery or from good to evil?”**

**Before Lan Wangji could respond, they heard a shout from outside, “Kill them!”**

**Wei Wuxian turned towards the door, “They’re catching people?”**

**“Chasing the Wen Sect’s remaining evil,” Lan Wangji said.**

**“Where are those three shards of Yin Iron?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**“Destroyed,” Lan Wangji answered.**

**The shouts got louder and both looked unsettled.**

An undetectable thing that could change people’s minds from good to evil.

Jin Zixuan couldn’t help but apply those words to his Sect. Rumors were such a thing.

He felt his stomach churn, knowing the shouts the two just heard were likely Wen civilians about to be slaughtered by his Sect’s disciples. Under his father’s orders. Carried out happily by those who blindly carried out orders. The cowards who didn’t fight at all in the war but were more than willing to kill when the target wasn’t fighting back.

“Don’t be rash,” A-Li warned, “The time will come.”

He nodded tightly. The time would come, and then he would have to make a decision.

Jin Zixuan had already decided his father needed to be removed from power. Whether he would face execution or not...well, that was something for Chifeng-Zun and Zewu-Jun to lead an inquiry on.

Then he’d decide whether to renounce his brother and have him share in that fate, or decide on something else. He had to be punished. That much was clear from the Sunshot Campaign, but he also deserved the chance to rise again. What punishment could do so without being too lenient?

**Lan Xichen stood with Jin Guangshan and Nie Mingjue in the empty throne room.**

**Jin Guangshan approached, “Lan-zongzhu, chasing the remaining evil is easy. You don’t have to bother. I will get it done properly by myself.”**

**“But I just heard a woman’s voice,” Lan Xichen protested, “Catching the remaining evil doesn’t need to include the defenseless Sect members.”**

**“Xichen,” Nie Mingjue said, “I know that you’re a kind person, but even if we destroy the Wen Sect, there are numerous followers all over the land. You and I conquered Nightless City, but they might take advantage when we relax our guard. They might reunite and fight for the Wen Sect while we’re busy settling down.”**

**Lan Xichen looked as though he might argue, but just closed his mouth.**

**“The Lan Sect has always preferred civilizing people,” Nie Mingjue continued, “What Xichen said was not unreasonable. Jin-zongzhu, how about letting go of these defenseless members of the Wen Sect?”**

“That was your decision?” Wen Qing couldn’t help but ask.

She’d thought...well, she’d thought her people were universally condemned. She thought that Zewu-Jun hadn’t put up a protest because he trusted his sworn brothers. She’d thought Chifeng-Zun was too caught up in his vengeance to care if innocents were killed.

“I’d like an answer to that as well,” Jiang Wanyin sat up, lending her his authority, “I was under the impression that to bear the name Wen was a death sentence.”

“That wasn’t what we agreed to at all,” Zewu-Jun claimed.

Jiang Wanyin snorted, “How was I supposed to know?”

It was somewhat heartening to know Jiang Wanyin wasn’t included in these discussions at all.

Zewu-Jun flinched, “We didn’t mean to exclude you-”

“It’s not an oversight if it happens repeatedly,” Jiang Wanyin interrupted.

“Would you have objected?” Jin Guangshan asked.

“It depends on how this discussion goes,” The young Sect Leader growled.

**Jin Guangshan chuckled, “Chifeng-Zun, Zewu-Jun, there is nothing wrong with considering benevolence first, but don’t forget that though the Wen Sect is gone and the Yin Iron destroyed, there is still one shard missing. We cannot ignore it. That great of power doesn’t need further elaboration.”**

**“If,” He turned towards them, “And I mean if, it fell into the hands of the remaining Wen or other people with ambition, it would bring disaster. Therefore, to capture the Wen is to find out the whereabouts of the Yin Iron.”**

**Nie Mingjue saluted, “Jin-zongzhu has thought about it very thoroughly.”**

**“Jin-zongzhu,” Lan Xichen noted, “What do you mean by people with ambition?”**

“He meant Wei Wuxian,” A-Xuan huffed, “Here I thought the Jin Sect could show gratitude.”

Jiang Yanli wished there was something she could do, but she was well aware of the anguish of being unable to stop a family member. At least she’d always known A-Xian was a good person at heart.

“We agreed it was right to suspect him,” Jin Guangshan narrowed his eyes, “After all, who could have guessed there were more pieces of Yin Iron?”

“I did,” A-Li smiled politely.

“Guangyao, did you ever question Wei Wuxian directly?” A-Xuan demanded.

“No,” Lianfeng-Zun answered after a slight hesitation.

“Did you ask Jiang Wanyin?” Her husband followed up, “If anyone could enlighten you about Wei Wuxian’s ambitions, it would be his brother and Sect Leader.”

Lianfeng-Zun lowered his gaze, “No. I would never dare question a Sect Leader.”

That was a job for another Sect Leader. It was Jin Guangshan’s role to request relevant information from A-Cheng.

A-Xuan snorted, “Wei Wuxian saved us all, and less than a week later you are all suspecting him of...what? Wanting to grab power? Harboring resentment against us? Who seems more guilty?”

Jiang Yanli squeezed his hand, hoping to restrain him. It was true that the one with ambition was Jin Guangshan. The one harboring resentment as well. Everything he accused A-Xian of, he was likely guilty of the same. It was just the way men like her father-in-law were like.

**Jin Guangshan turned around, “Huh? Nothing. It’s just that this is of great importance. We shouldn’t dismiss suspicious people. Therefore, no matter if the person is from the Wen, Jin, or Jiang Sect, everyone has to be inquired one by one. I’ve asked A-Yao to conduct a detailed investigation.”**

**Jin Guangshan moved closer, “To tell you the truth, A-Yao is my long-lost son. Now he’s very lucky to have the chance to find his origin. How fortunate!”**

**“He is now renamed Jin Guangyao,” Nie Mingjue said as the man entered the room with more Jin disciples. They led a group of prisoners with them.**

**Jin Guangyao bowed, “Zongzhu, the remaining evil from Nightless City have been captured and await justice.”**

“Some remaining evil,” MianMian muttered.

It was her Sect at the time that carried out this mass execution. If she hadn’t been under Jin Zixuan’s command...if they hadn’t kept him in the dark...she wasn’t sure what she would have done. She probably would have tried to help some Wen civilians escape and then been exiled or executed for treason.

Qin Su bit her lip, “Why would Jin-zongzhu take charge of the investigation if he wasn’t going to do it properly?”

Chifeng-Zun snorted, “It was the first position of authority he could get his hands on.”

“By taking control of the clean up, he took control of recovery,” Or lack thereof in the case of the Wen Sect.

“Without having to lose anything in the war,” Qin Su murmured.

“Minimal loss, maximum gain,” MianMian agreed.

**“A-Yao,” Lan Xichen stepped closer, “What is your opinion about these remaining evils?”**

**“I’ve interrogated all the rest,” Jin Guangyao answered, “There is no clue about the Yin Iron. Most of them are members of the Wen Clan who have no spiritual power. I suggest we confine and monitor the old, weak, and young as long as they stop making trouble. And those who have killed ours must be executed.”**

**“But where should we confine them?” Lan Xichen asked.**

**“The Wen Sect has a place called Qiongqi Pass,” Jin Guangyao replied, “It’s a secluded road in a valley which is easy to defend and difficult to attack. Why not keep them there?”**

“So it was agreed to be imprisonment, not death,” Lan Wangji said.

“Did you think I would agree to anything less?” Xichen asked.

Lan Wangji didn't answer, but he was sure his expression said it all. The war had affected his expectations of everyone. He didn't expect his brother to stand against the cultivation world if they decided on vengeance. They'd lost too much to risk losing more to another disagreement. He also knew how much influence Nie Mingjue had over Xichen.

If there was anyone who could convince him death was more suitable than imprisonment, it was Nie Mingjue.

Though it looked like the opposite was true here.

**Lan Xichen nodded. Nie Mingjue huffed, "You are really familiar with it."**

**At his suspicion, Jin Guangyao's expression fell.**

**"Do as A-Yao said," Lan Xichen ordered, and there was no protest by either Sect Leader.**

**They simply took their leave, Jin Guangshan pausing for a moment to smile at Jin Guangyao. As soon as he was gone, his expression fell further.**

**"A-Yao, you don't have to take it seriously," Lan Xichen tried to comfort him, "Mingjue-xiong is typical of his kind. He resents evil and favors the good. He's just afraid you've made the wrong choice."**

**"Resents evil?" Jin Guangyao repeated, "Am I evil?"**

That wasn't a question with a clear answer.

He killed the Nie Sect Captain. He saved Chifeng-Zun. He killed more Nie disciples. He also killed Wen Ruohan. He ran the investigation which condemned Wei Wuxian, but what authority did he have to question another Sect Leader or another Sect's Head Disciple? Did he purposely mess up the investigation or did Jin Guangshan never intend for it to succeed?

How much was the man's choices and how much was the circumstances he found himself in? What was more important? Was his pursuit of power and recognition evil in and of itself? If he weren't a bastard wouldn't those qualities be praised?

Even still, there was something about him that just seemed...unhinged.

Many were beginning to see that same cruelty in Jin Guangshan.

**"I didn't mean that," Lan Xichen stammered.**

**"Zewu-Jun, you don't need to think about that," Jin Guangyao assured him, "I've been following Nie-zongzhu for so many years. I know what he's thinking. I never take it personally." With that, he managed a smile, "Zewu-Jun, you should go with Nie-zongzhu. Here. I'll handle it."**

**"Okay," Lan Xichen agreed, stopping him from bowing with a smile.**

“Why did you agree to the sworn brotherhood?” Qin Su asked.

It just seemed ridiculous seeing how Chifeng-Zun distrusted Lianfeng-Zun. There didn’t have to be a whole ceremony to commemorate their victory.

“Xichen insisted,” Chifeng-Zun answered, “He wanted to help Jin Guangyao.”

“But you didn’t,” She tilted her head, “Or do you not hate him as much as you seem to?”

“We worked well together for years,” The intimidating man grimaced, “Then we didn’t.” He lowered his voice, “Sometimes I wish he’d just stayed Meng Yao.”

Qin Su glanced at Jin Guangshan and shuddered. It couldn’t be easy being his son. She couldn’t imagine having someone like that for a father.

**Wei Wuxian stood on a cliff outside the palace. He fiddled with Chenqing as Lan Wangji approached and stood by his side.**

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian said, his voice serious, “What do you think about the people here? Who is good and who is evil?” His breathing hitched, and he once again grabbed at his chest.**

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji grabbed his arm, “Concentrate.”**

**Wei Wuxian closed his eyes and focused. The attack passed in time.**

So he was already against their treatment of the Wen Sect.

Nie Mingjue felt another wave of shame pass over him. They’d all been in that city. There was no place where screaming couldn’t be heard. Nie Mingjue just grew deaf to it until it stopped. It didn’t matter to him. They deserved it in his eyes.

Typical. Just like everyone else. As though justice were a matter of public opinion and not principles.

Yet Wei Wuxian, whose thoughts should have been as clouded as his with resentment, saw clearly that this was wrong.

But no one asked him for his opinion.

“Do you have an answer, Jiang Wanyin?” Jin Guangshan asked.

“Those who have killed must be killed,” Jiang Wanyin repeated, “By that logic, those who have saved lives must be saved.”

Nie Mingjue doubted he would have brought up Wen Qing then, but he would have established a precedent. None of them thought anybody with the name Wen was helpful to their cause. They would have agreed thinking it wouldn’t have applied to anyone.

Then, when Wen Qing came to Wei Wuxian, things would have gone differently.

**“Would you like to learn the musical notation of Cleansing?” Lan Wangji offered.**

**Wei Wuxian turned to him, “Lan Zhan. You want me to learn Cleansing? You doubt me too, don’t you?”**

**Lan Wangji looked off, then his gaze darted to Wei Wuxian, “When did you forge the Stygian Tiger Amulet?”**

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian half-smiled, “If I said that I had a Yin Iron sword in the Xuanwu Cave, would you believe it?”**

**“When?” Lan Wangji asked.**

**“When Xuanwu was killed,” Wei Wuxian answered.**

**“When did you finish refining it?” Lan Wangji clarified, refusing to get distracted.**

**Wei Wuxian turned away and sighed, “Recently...”**

**“You knew it was Yin Iron,” Lan Wangji pressed, “Why did you need to refine it?”**

**“Lan Zhan, enough,” Wei Wuxian snapped, then looked guilty.**

Why? Because it was the only way to win.

There was no other choice. Refine it and win or leave it as it was and lose.

Lan Qiren’s thoughts turned to his nephews’ mother. No one had ever asked her why she had killed. They only saw her actions and condemned her without further inquiry. The elders told him it was a black and white matter, and he’d been too recently shoved into the position of Sect Leader to have any sway over that decision.

He didn’t realize the lack of investigation affected Wangji so much. He remembered the few times he would linger outside the Jingshi, listening to his nephews and their mother. She always sounded so happy, so kind and patient with the children.

In those moments, he would wonder how such a wonderful mother deserved imprisonment.

Then he’d remember his responsibilities, and take his nephews back. He wondered if there was a reason the elders forbade an investigation, just as the farce of Wei Wuxian’s was a plot of the Jin Sect. But if it were so unfair, why wouldn’t she have protested?

Or was there some secret she was protecting, just like Wei Wuxian was protecting Jiang Wanyin?

**“You promised that you would let me help you,” Lan Wangji reminded him.**

**Wei Wuxian didn’t look at him, “But if you don’t believe me, how can I help you?”**



**Wei Wuxian looked over the cliff, then turned away to leave. Lan Wangji caught his arm, “The Stygian Tiger Amulet is not orthodox. Once you get restless, you will lose control.”**

**“Lan Zhan, are you afraid that I’ll be like Wen Ruohan?” Wei Wuxian asked, “Controlled by Yin Iron? But the Stygian Tiger Amulet is not the Yin Iron, nor am I Wen Ruohan.”**

“He really isn’t,” Luo Qingyang commented.

Jin Guangshan gritted his teeth as he heard some ugly comparisons. He wasn’t the same as Wen Ruohan either. He wanted control over the cultivation Sects, but he wasn’t stupid enough to seek domination through brute force.

Not when there were other means.

If his reputation continued to take these hits, he wasn’t sure he could get through this. Zixun still hadn’t realized he was going down. His bastard likely saw where this was going, but it seemed he’d already abandoned Jin Guangshan for A-Xuan.

A-Xuan, who picked the worst time to grow a spine. He had to find a way to stamp his newfound rebellion. He wouldn’t let this be his downfall.

**They stared at each other. Once again, before Lan Wangji could form a response, they could hear shouting.**

**“Help! Please don’t kill my child!”**

**Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji went running. They came across a group of people being hunted by Jin disciples, led by Jin Zixun. The only survivors were a woman and her child. Jin Zixun lifted his bow to shoot her.**

**Wei Wuxian turned to Lan Wangji, and they intervened.**

“We had just agreed on imprisonment,” Zewu-Jun said, “What is this, Jin-gongzi?”

“They were involved with the Yin Iron!” Jin Zixun claimed.

“Even the children?” Jiang Wanyin demanded, “How?”

“They resisted arrest,” Jin Zixun said next, “We didn’t dare risk them getting away.”

“Is the Jin Sect so weak?” Chifeng-Zun scoffed, “If you were having such difficulties that you could not round up weakened cultivators and children, our armies were still present to assist.”

Wen Qing didn’t want to listen to this. She glanced hesitantly towards Jiang Wanyin, seeing his face set in stone. His protective rage reminded her of Wei Wuxian, despite their many differences. These discussions could turn against her at any time, but she was relatively safe as long as she stayed close to Jiang Wanyin. She shifted slightly closer to him.

They'd agreed on imprisonment.

It was good for her cause that the Jin Sect was already shown to be disobeying that agreement. It would go on to show the prison itself was created and run in bad faith.

It was just terrible to relive.

**“Lan-er-gongzi,” Jin Zixun handed his bow off, “I don’t know why Lan-er-gongzi would want to help the Wen Sect.”**

**“These are women, children, and old men,” Wei Wuxian argued, “Are they also evil?”**

**Jin Zixun scoffed, “It’s Zongzhu’s orders that anyone who was involved with the Yin Iron should not be alive.” Wei Wuxian almost lifted Chenqing, “Nie-zongzhu and Lan-zongzhu also agreed. Does the Jiang Sect have any objections?”**

**Wei Wuxian stepped forward, but Lan Wangji grabbed his arm.**

**Jin Zixun laughed and walked away.**

“You dare speak for me?” Da-ge growled.

“There was an agreement,” Jin Zixun idiotically protested.

“Yes, for those potentially involved with the Yin Iron to be questioned,” Nie Huaisang opened his fan, “Not killed. I wonder, Jin-gongzi, were you given different orders or were you just too stupid to understand?”

“You-” Jin Zixun’s brain finally seemed to kick in.

His next words were important. Nie Huaisang saw a few ways they could be interpreted. He could take the fall and say he misunderstood, or deliberately disobeyed because he thought the Wen Sect deserved a greater punishment. That would be just as much a death sentence as the curse he bore.

Or he could implicate someone above him. There were very few people above him.

“Why didn’t Hanguang-Jun protest if he knew it was wrong?” Jin Zixun demanded.

Deflection. Such a lazy counter.

“Because the Lan Sect was significantly weakened after the war?” Nie Huaisang asked back, keeping his voice deceptively light, “Because he’d been too concerned about the love of his life being in a coma to keep up with all the decisions being made? Because you just threatened the love of his life by making it seem like any protest would ostracize the Jiang Sect?”

“Come now, Jin-gongzi,” He fluttered his fan, “You said exactly what you needed to in order to make them shut up. You can’t be that incompetent.”

“What are you insinuating, Nie Huaisang?” Jin Guangshan asked, also deceptively light.

Oh, he didn’t even get a title anymore.

“Insinuating? My brother has been clear in his meaning,” Da-ge supported him, “Either Jingongzi is incompetent or his orders were different, and if he is not incompetent...”

“The matter will be rectified, Chifeng-Zun,” Jin Zixuan promised, “Right, father?”

Jin Guangshan said nothing.

**Wei Wuxian glared at Jin Zixun as he left, then sighed, “I’m afraid there will be more resentful spirits in Qishan. What is needed now is the music Rest.” He gently removed Lan Wangji’s hand from his arm and stormed off in the other direction.**

**Lan Wangji sat down and pulled out his guqin, beginning to play for the dead.**

**From a distance, he could hear a flute join him in a mournful accompaniment.**

Jiang Cheng was acutely aware that Wen Qing was sitting closer to him.

It was distracting. Probably in a good way otherwise he would have exploded at Jin Zixun when he saw what he did to force Wei Wuxian’s secrecy. As much as he wished he could have spoken freely, he was restrained by Wei Wuxian’s demonic cultivation. He refused to put him at greater risk by making dramatic decisions.

Of course it went the same for Wei Wuxian. Of course he tried to not act out if it meant causing him more trouble.

Jiang Cheng should have realized before that it didn’t matter if he did everything right. As long as the cultivation world was wrong, Wei Wuxian would set himself against it.

Attacking Jin Zixun would only give Jin Guangshan the opportunity to end this viewing. He wasn’t sure how well the device would hold up to any damage, and wouldn’t it be tragic if it was damaged because Jiang Cheng couldn’t contain his temper?

So it was a good thing Wen Qing was close, but was she there to protect him from himself or for something more?

Jiang Cheng understood how hard it was to relive the destruction of one’s Sect. He’d sought out his sister for comfort. Wen Qing didn’t have her brother here. She only had him.

Would she welcome his comfort?

**“We swear to god,” Nie Mingjue stood between Lan Xichen and Jin Guangyao, “Today, the three of us will make a solemn pledge here. Live up to our Sects. Help the common people. Heaven and Earth are here to bear witness. If there is disloyalty between us, we’ll be universally condemned. Both God and the people will be furious with us.”**

**Jin Guangyao and Lan Xichen repeated his words. They knelt and kowtowed.**

Lan Xichen noted the contradictions in their vows. Live up to their Sects.

How could Da-ge and A-Yao live up to their Sects and help the common people? The Nie Sect collected corpses to use as guards for their resentful, sentient sabers. The Jin Sect was corrupt, the golden tower hiding a mass of sins.

The only loyalty that existed between them was the care they both had for him.

Lan Xichen should never have insisted on this. He shouldn't have forced such a bond.

Were they already condemned? The people barely knew a fraction of the secrets and betrayals between the three of them.

Or was he the only one who actually meant his vows when he said them?

**The banquet in the palace was that night.**

**When Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen walked into it, the Jiang trio were already talking to Jin Guangshan and Jin Guangyao. They greeted each other.**

**“Congratulations, Jiang-zongzhu,” Lan Xichen smiled, “I believe that under your leadership, Lotus Pier will surely revive to protect the people of Yunmeng.”**

**“You flatter me,” Jiang Cheng replied, “In the future, I’d like to receive your guidance.”**

**Lan Wangji stared at Wei Wuxian, who stared back. His eyes drifted to the white sash of mourning tied around his waist, but his attention was diverted by Nie Mingjue’s arrival. He and Nie Huaisang made their greetings.**

**“Nie-zongzhu, why are you so late?” Jin Guangshan asked, “Everyone is waiting for you.”**

“I wonder why,” Luo Qingyang muttered.

Chifeng-Zun snorted.

It was distasteful to dine in the halls of their enemy. It was downright insulting now that they knew this was the place where Chifeng-Zun was tormented.

“It’s admirable you showed up at all,” Qin Su complimented.

“Huaisang insisted,” Chifeng-Zun admitted.

Her gaze flickered to the younger brother, who was still hiding slightly behind his fan. She’d already figured out he wasn’t as much of an idiot as everyone thought he was. Nor was he a coward. He understood the political repercussions of missing such an event. Undoubtedly he was the reason Chifeng-Zun was even at this birth celebration.

Qin Su lowered her voice, “I don’t think he’s mad at you anymore.”

“Do you.” The larger man’s voice went tense again, as though he didn’t want to believe her.

“Hm,” She hummed, “You were sincere in your apology and there’s so much else to be angry about.”

“Not being angry isn’t the same as being forgiven,” Chifeng-Zun pointed out.

“But it’s a start,” Qin Su offered him a reassuring smile.

She was much less intimidated by him the more time passed. She saw he was more than a warrior. It was hard to fear him when she’d seen his pain. It was easy to see how much he loved when he was willing to go into a sworn brotherhood with someone who caused him so much agony just to make his best friend happy.

**Nie Mingjue just leveled a look at Jin Guangyao, who bowed his head, “Chifeng-Zun. Please have a seat.”**

**“A-Yao,” Lan Xichen interjected, “You’ve forgotten. Now that you two are sworn brothers, you should call him Da-ge.”**

**“Yes,” Jin Guangyao replied, “Er-ge, thanks for the reminder.”**

**Lan Xichen nodded to Nie Mingjue, and Jin Guangyao tried again, “Da-ge, please.”**

**Nie Mingjue still didn’t move, “Jin-zongzhu, what do you mean?” He gestured at the throne.**

**“Nie-zongzhu, please have a seat so we can begin the banquet,” Jin Guangshan said.**

**Nie Huaisang’s eyebrows went up for a moment, but he turned his attention to his brother.**

**“Jin-zongzhu. Everybody,” He raised his voice, “Although we’re holding a banquet in Nightless City, I will never sit in that seat.” He pointed at the throne.**

**Jin Guangshan laughed, “Nie-zongzhu. No wonder you are respected by all. The blame should be on me. I’m too careless. We’ll rearrange our seats. Nie-zongzhu, please. Have a seat.”**

**“Please,” Nie Mingjue agreed, and everyone went into the room.**

Was it carelessness or was it cruelty?

Lianfeng-Zun knew what happened in that room. He’d spilled the blood that needed to be cleaned before they could feast there. With as much input into the proceedings as he’d had, did he never think to mention that this place could be uncomfortable for Chifeng-Zun? After serving so long in the Nie Sect, he had to know how much pain and grief Wen Ruohan caused him.

It left a void that couldn’t be filled just with Wen Ruohan’s death.

Did Lianfeng-Zun know and not say anything? Or did he tell his father and Jin Guangshan decided to be cruel?

Refusing the throne was taken by many as Chifeng-Zun's rejection of Chief Cultivator.

Was that all a scheme of the Jin Sect?

**"Wei-gongzi," Jin Guangyao stopped him and bowed, "Wei-gongzi. What did you want to say to me just now?"**

**"Me?" Wei Wuxian asked.**

**"Yes," Jin Guangyao nodded, "You seemed to want to say something to me when we were greeting each other."**

**"Nothing," Wei Wuxian assured him, "It's just that the weapon you held seemed to be a flexible saber when you killed Wen Ruohan. Why doesn't Jin-gongzi carry it today?"**

**"Wei-gongzi, I'm sorry to have made a show," Jin Guangyao apologized, "It's just the first thing I could find. Later, I found it was sinister so I threw it away."**

**Wei Wuxian smiled, "I see."**

**Jin Guangyao gestured him in, "Please."**

**"Please," Wei Wuxian nodded, then walked away.**

**"Did you really?" Er-ge whispered.**

**Jin Guangyao sighed, "I still have it."**

**Not that he had any intention of using it. He didn't need to pull out a sword to get people killed. He only carried it as a last resort.**

**He wondered if Wei Wuxian suspected him of lying. He wasn't as carefree as he pretended to be. He must have heard about his investigation. Maybe, if he approached this differently, he could have used it to ask about the Amulet or the missing Yin Iron.**

**He hadn't, because he didn't want to raise Wei Wuxian's suspicions.**

**Hanguang-Jun sat at his table alone for a long time, watching others interact. He then took his sword and went outside, to where Wei Wuxian drank on the steps. He stood above him.**

**"It's you, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian twirled Chenqing, "How about playing Cleansing?"**

**"I'm learning a new score," Lan Wangji admitted.**

**Wei Wuxian scoffed, "You haven't given up, have you?" He sat up, "You are really stubborn." He laughed to himself, then drank more. There came a cry of celebration**

**behind them.**

Did Wei Ying think he'd given up?

Lan Wangji hoped he hadn't given that impression, but after this...Wei Ying only saw him at the Crowd Hunt and the one time he managed to sneak away to Yiling.

Xichen said he talked to him, but given his brother's guilt about it, he'd said the wrong thing.

Wei Ying didn't know he'd been all but confined to Cloud Recesses. He heard he was mending the library, but he didn't know that was involuntary. He didn't know about his punishment after his visit. He didn't know how restricted his night hunts had become. He was no longer allowed to go anywhere alone.

Wei Ying didn't know his history. What reason did he have to suspect the Lan Sect would be so strict?

Lan Wangji once again resisted the urge to just go to the Burial Mounds now. They were entering a risky time. If Jin Guangshan decided to act before he was outed, it could spell disaster for all.

**"Many Sects gathered together," Jin Guangshan started his speech, "To crusade against the Wen Sect, which had great fortune the past century. The success of the Sunshot Campaign owes its gratitude to the QingheNie, the GusuLan, and the YunmengJiang, these three Sects. Today, I'll drink first to show my respect to you."**

**Wei Wuxian shook his head as he listened to everyone respond to that speech, then get quiet to drink.**

**"Everybody, I have always been concerned about something. It was inappropriate for me to mention it before because of the war. Now the disturbance has been suppressed and I have no worries anymore," Jin Guangshan continued, "Luckily, all of you are here today, so I hope all of you can witness."**

**"As you all know, Jiang Fengmian and I were as close as brothers," Jin Guangshan droned on, "And my wife and Madam Yu were as close as sisters. My son, Zixuan, had been engaged to Jiang-guniang since childhood. But because of some misunderstanding, we called it off."**

Some misunderstanding?

What lies!

Jin Zixuan had insulted Jiang Yanli at every turn. He'd insulted her publicly and privately. He'd made her cry and dismissed her contributions to the war effort.

Jin Zixuan was lucky Jiang Yanli loved him enough to forgive him. If her affections had been any less...well, there wouldn't be a birth to celebrate because there never would have been a marriage.

This was just another ploy by the Jin Sect to bully the Jiang Sect. What was Jiang Wanyin supposed to do? Correct Jin Guangshan and speak of past grievances openly? Be pressured into promising his sister to a man who didn't deserve her?

It was despicable.

**Wei Wuxian got to his feet, walking back into the hall as he listened to the speech.**

**“What a pity!” Jin Guangshan lamented, “Now my friend has joined the heavens, and my wife and I both hope that the two families can become relatives by marriage again. Not only would it comfort my old friend, but also I can look after his daughter, which is one of my wishes. Jiang-zongzhu, what is your opinion?”**

**Wei Wuxian watched Jiang Cheng stay silent.**

**“It’s a good thing,” Sect Leader Yao commented.**

**Others agreed.**

Like sheep being herded off a cliff.

MianMian shook her head. How had they not figured out sooner what was going on? How had it taken her so long to see the evil in her own Sect? The corruption in the entire cultivation world?

The earlier anger at Jin Guangshan’s audacity was fading as everyone was reminded how they were complicit in this.

They were so quick to blame when it wasn’t themselves at fault. They would also be quick to forgive if it meant clemency for themselves.

**Nie Huaisang sent his friend a pitying look, as did Lan Xichen. Jiang Cheng grimaced, conflicted.**

**“Jin-zongzhu,” Wei Wuxian called, drawing attention to himself as he walked further in, “We appreciate your kindness.” He made his way to the front and saluted, “Jin-zongzhu. Marriage is a lifelong matter. I assume that you should ask my Shijie first, rather than ask Jiang Cheng directly. Do you agree, Jiang Cheng?”**

**“Wei Wuxian,” Jin Zixun narrowed his head, “Our zongzhu is talking to Jiang-zongzhu. How dare you interrupt them?”**

“How dare he?” Nie Huaisang asked, “How dare Jin-zongzhu try to pressure Jiang Cheng into agreeing to a marriage?”

“They are in love,” Jin Guangshan said.

Nie Huaisang scoffed, “Now they are, but love is a journey more than it is a destination. Would they love each other the same if their marriage came about this way?”



"I handled it, Nie Huaisang," Jiang Yanli smiled.

The question haunted her at times. Their courtship had been so complicated, but she sometimes wondered what would have happened if their betrothal was never called off. Would they have come to love each other?

Or would he have remained arrogant and resentful?

Jiang Yanli tried not to repeat her parent's mistakes, but if they'd gotten married any sooner than when they had, their marriage would have been marred with misunderstandings. Similar misunderstandings that led to her parent's unhappiness.

She would have ended up just like her mother. She would have thought she loved her husband, but she wasn't loved in return. Except she was never as strong or outspoken as her mother. She would have just faded until A-Xian or A-Cheng did something.

**"Well, you can ask Jiang Cheng yourself," Wei Wuxian retorted, then looked to Jin Guangshan.**

**Jiang Cheng stood, "Jin-zongzhu, this shouldn't be decided between two Sects. When my father was still alive, he had the same thought. We should leave the decision to A-Jie. It shouldn't be meddled with by others."**

**Wei Wuxian smiled.**

**Jin Guangshan laughed, "You're right. As for this, we should listen to Jiang-guniang's opinion."**

**Jin Zixuan sat up straighter. Jiang Yanli rose.**

**"Shijie," Wei Wuxian said, an offer and a warning.**

**Lan Wangji took his place behind his brother.**

**"I'm very grateful for your kindness," Jiang Yanli bowed, "But the Jiang Sect has gone through much havoc. As a disciple of the Jiang Sect, I should think more about the whole Sect, and ought to return to Yunmeng to rebuild Lotus Pier." Her gaze drifted to Wei Wuxian, who smiled, "For now, it's not the right time for me to get married."**

They got married at the perfect time.

Jin Zixuan winced, then corrected that thought. It would have been more perfect if Wei Wuxian could have been there. As much trouble as his brother-in-law would have caused...he brought A-Li twice as much joy.

Love was as much a journey as it was a destination.

But he could still enjoy where they were at the moment.

In this moment, he was sitting with the most beautiful woman alive, who held the most perfect child ever born. He chose, for a moment, to forget about the schemes and evils of his family and enjoy the little family he had with him. This was all he needed.

Even if his sense of honor gave him a responsibility to do and be more.

**Jin Zixuan rocked back, and tried not to look disappointed.**

**“Jin-zongzhu,” Jiang Yanli continued, “Please excuse me.”**

**Lan Xichen nodded and ducked his head to hide a small smile.**

**Wei Wuxian saluted, then left again. Lan Wangji didn’t follow him this time.**

They’d thought it was rude at the time, but now they understood.

How could Wei Wuxian celebrate their victory, when he knew they had not triumphed over evil?

## Chapter End Notes

Alright, so I finally decided on a tentative amount of chapters.

25) Return home (Cloud Recesses and Lotus Pier)

26) Crowd Hunt

27) Banquet and Qiongqi Pass

28) LWJ's visit and WN's revival

29) Settling Down

30) Ending

31) Ending Pt. 2

32) Epilogue (Just in case the two other chapters aren't enough)

Ending is still undecided. I kinda want to prevent the Yi City arc, but the drama is so unclear about where Song Lan, Xiao Xingchen, and Xue Yang are at this time. What do y'all think?

We've surpassed 4,000 kudos! I never thought I'd see the day where I wrote a story so liked! Thank you so much!

Edit Sept. 5th: Now over 4,200 kudos! I know I shouldn't pay attention to the count as much as I do but it still amazes me! I appreciate the support!

# Home Sweet Home

## Chapter Summary

If only we could stay there forever

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Why wasn’t Chifeng-Zun made Chief Cultivator?”

They were finally willing to ask the question out loud.

Nie Mingjue grimaced and kept his gaze set on the projection.

After the hell Wen Ruohan put the cultivation world through, Nie Mingjue thought they needed stability. Doomed as he was to die of a qi deviation, he wasn’t exactly stable. He didn’t have the temperament or the lifespan to be an effective leader outside of war. So he didn’t take the title.

Xichen didn’t want it. Nobody was eager to have a Lan as a Chief Cultivator. Their three thousand rules could stay in Cloud Recesses. Not that Xichen would hold them to that standard, but no one was interested in a Chief Cultivator who wouldn’t drink and didn’t believe in decadence.

Jiang Wanyin, well, no one wanted him in power as long as Wei Wuxian was an issue.

If he’d known Huaisang’s true strength, Nie Mingjue would have taken the position. He’d have let himself be a figurehead while his younger brother handled the politics. Maybe they could have found a way for him to inherit the title after his death.

Now that he might live...

“I think you’d make a great Chief Cultivator,” Lady Qin commented.

Nie Mingjue wouldn’t be the worst.

**Back at Lotus Pier, the three siblings led their disciples inside. It was still a mess of bloodstains and abandoned weapons and flags. They walked slowly through it. They caught sight of the Wen Sect’s sigil. Wei Wuxian gripped Chenqing tighter, resentment started to gather, but Jiang Cheng struck it down with Zidian.**

“Good riddance,” MianMian muttered, then glanced at Wen Qing to offer an apology if she heard.

They were drawing closer and closer to Qiongqi Pass. To where Wen Qing found her brother's corpse, that Wei Wuxian would later reanimate. Or something along those lines. No one really knew what happened there. Only that there was now a sentient fierce corpse.

"In an ideal world, this would be it, wouldn't it?" Qin Su whispered, "Their happy ending?"

A return home. Not quite triumphant. How could it be, with all they had lost? But they made it home together. Those who slaughtered their Sect met a fitting end. Maybe none of them seemed to have marriage in their immediate future, but they had each other.

"In an ideal world," Chifeng-Zun agreed.

"Then all their problems from here on..." Qin Su trailed off, "Was it all the Jin Sect?"

MianMian paused. It would be easy to blame it on the Jin Sect, just like it was easy to blame everything on the Wen Sect. Sure, they deserved a lot of the blame, but all of it?

Chifeng-Zun shook his head, "Wei Wuxian still needed to hide his lost golden core. He couldn't do that forever in a cultivation Sect."

Wei Wuxian would have left. Jiang Wanyin would be just as angry. Jiang Yanli just as hurt. And without the support of a Sect the cultivation world would have turned against a wandering demonic cultivator. Without anyone to supervise him, it would be impossible to clear his name in any meaningful way.

The Jin Sect sped things up, but the problem was larger than just one Sect.

**Back at Gusu, Lan Xichen walked towards his brother's house. He could hear him practicing.**

**"Xiongzhong," Lan Wangji greeted, but didn't rise.**

**"According to the disciples, Hanguang-Jun went to the Library the moment he came back, took away many music scores, and focused on playing night and day. So I came to check if that was true."**

**It obviously was.**

**"Xiongzhong, I want to enter the forbidden chamber," Lan Wangji requested.**

**"For what?" Lan Xichen asked.**

**"To study music scores," Lan Wangji answered.**

**"The Lan Sect has forbidden techniques?" Jin Guangshan asked.**

It shouldn't surprise him. Every Sect tended to hoard valuables. Information counted as such. He always suspected the Lan Sect wasn't as righteous behind closed doors as they were when being overbearing...

Lan Xichen smiled slightly, “Techniques that are beyond the capabilities of most cultivators.”

Because Zewu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun were above them all in power.

“Of course,” Jin Guangshan matched his fake smile, “Though we’ve all seen what Wei Wuxian is capable of with a flute.”

The Lan Sect did have the Yin Iron. It may have been knowledge solely kept to the Sect Leaders, but there might have been another Lan Yi somewhere in the centuries, or someone who gave the Yin Iron more thought. They were also the Sect that valued musical cultivation the most.

“Nothing in there is similar to Wei Ying’s techniques,” Hanguang-Jun said solemnly.

Jin Guangshan didn’t know what to say to that. He just had a feeling they were about to see the side of the Lan Sect they would prefer to keep in private. Of course, Hanguang-Jun wanted to explain why he didn’t follow Wei Wuxian after the war, leading to this opportunity.

**Then a disciple came with a summons from Lan Qiren, and they both went to him.**

**“Cleansing resentment?” Lan Xichen asked.**

**“Yes,” Lan Qiren set down his tea, “I wasn’t there when you made your attack on Qishan. But to a certain extent, I know how tragic the last battle was. I’ve also heard about Wei Wuxian.”**

**Lan Xichen glanced at his brother, who just looked down.**

Jiang Yanli bit her lip.

When Hanguang-Jun said there was nothing in the Lan’s forbidden chamber similar to A-Xian’s techniques, she believed him. Everyone believed him. Because if there was anything similar, then there would already be methods to help A-Xian.

If he found anything, not even Lan Qiren would have stopped him from helping A-Xian.

Her father-in-law was trying to make it sound like the Lan Sect didn’t embody the righteousness of their motto.

He didn’t realize that righteousness didn’t factor into this situation at all. There was only Hanguang-Jun desperately trying to help the love of his life. He was looking for a solution where everyone else looked for elimination. Even his own family didn’t support him in his love.

At least A-Xian and A-Cheng kept their thoughts on A-Xuan to themselves. She knew they didn’t see him the same way she did, but they refrained from insulting him to her face. They let her make her own choices without interference.

It couldn't be easy for Hanguang-Jun.

But that wasn't quite what was upsetting her.

Something about this just felt wrong. Teacher Lan could be harsh, but she thought he had a soft spot for his nephews. She also thought that he would know better than to listen to the rumors about A-Xian. Yes, he still held some prejudice because of his personality and parentage, but this felt like his issues went deeper than those.

**Lan Qiren stroked his beard, "When the nest falls, no egg will survive. Now there are corpses everywhere. It will easily beget evil. Also, the Wen Sect was using such demonic cultivation. If it isn't cleansed in time, there will be an unimaginable outcome."**

**"Yes, Shufu," Lan Xichen acknowledged.**

**"Shufu-" Lan Wangji stepped forward.**

**Lan Qiren held up a hand, then picked up a book, "Wangji. You don't need to accompany Xichen this time. You have another assignment. That day, Xichen left with our sacred books, it was hard to avoid missing or damaging some in the rush. Now, mending the collected books and the Lan disciplines is our first priority."**

**Lan Wangji accepted the book.**

**"There is no order without rules," Lan Qiren started walking away, "Disciplines are the foundation of our Sect. I hope you won't forget that."**

It was a layered conversation.

Don't forget the rules.

Don't continue associating with Wei Wuxian.

Forget him. Remember your place. Go where the chaos was. Don't add to it.

**Lan Wangji followed and knelt, holding the book out, "Shufu, I want to enter the forbidden chamber."**

**Lan Qiren turned to him, "Have you finished all the books in the Library?"**

**"Shufu, I want to enter the forbidden chamber," Lan Wangji repeated.**

**"If you have not, there's no need to enter there," Lan Qiren replied, walking past him again.**

**Lan Xichen patted his brother's shoulder, and Lan Wangji rose, visibly upset. They both bowed and started to leave.**

**"Wangji," Lan Qiren called after him, "Do you know why I won't let you leave with Xichen?" Lan Wangji blinked in fast succession, and Lan Qiren hesitated, "Leave**

**now.”**

Nie Huaisang tilted his head. That was an odd wording.

Why didn't Lan Qiren let him leave? Because Hanguang-Jun would go to Wei Wuxian. He didn't want Hanguang-Jun to ruin himself over a man who, at this point, was rumored to be another Wen Ruohan in the making. However, he didn't say any of this. The way he said it implied previous discussions about controlling passion because of image or righteousness.

If those existed, he was certain Er-ge and Hanguang-Jun would have included them.

Which meant the conversation came before Wei Wuxian's arrival at Cloud Recesses.

Considering neither Hanguang-Jun or Er-ge had anything resembling an illicit affair before then...

“Are they really so worried about their image?” Jiang Cheng muttered, “Would one scandal ruin the Lan Sect?”

Oh! Nie Huaisang stared at his brother, a conversation coming to mind. After their father's death, Er-ge came to visit. Da-ge, being Da-ge, naturally channeled his grief into anger. He couldn't take it out on Wen Ruohan, not then, so he started shouting at Er-ge. He didn't know that Nie Huaisang was just outside the room.

He only remembered it because it was the only time anyone ever mentioned Qingheng-Jun or Madam Lan where he could hear. He'd always just assumed Madam Lan died young and Qingheng-Jun was one of those powerful cultivators who went into seclusion seeking immortality, and something went wrong.

It made sense to him because he was a Nie, and Nie died young from cultivation issues.

Now that he thought about it, other cultivators weren't supposed to die that young.

Which meant Hanguang-Jun and Wei Wuxian weren't the Lan Sect's only scandal.

**Back at Lotus Pier, Jiang Cheng stood before his gathered disciples. Jiang Yanli stood to his side. Wei Wuxian was across the pavilion, leaning on a rail.**

**“I, Jiang Cheng, as the son of Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan, from now on officially succeed as Sect Leader of the YunmengJiang. The discipline of the Jiang Sect is to attempt the impossible,” Jiang Cheng stated, “As long as I'm still breathing, I'll devote myself to the core value of our Sect. I won't allow another disaster to happen!”**

**The disciples knelt and saluted, “Jiang-zongzhu.”**

**Jiang Cheng turned to his sister, who smiled.**

Wei Wuxian already stood apart.

Jiang Cheng had noticed. It was hard not to. He wanted his brother to stand on his other side, or at least, to stand first amidst their disciples. But no, he stood far away, as though he were just an observer.

He knew why he didn't ask. How could Jiang Cheng speak of their Sect's destruction without remembering his shameful behavior? How could he mention his parents without the knowledge that his mother would have approved of Wei Wuxian's standing at this moment? How even his father might have agreed with this?

"I can feel you angsty, Jiang-xiong," Nie Huaisang scolded, "You make a great Sect Leader."

"Just a terrible brother," Jiang Cheng scoffed.

"It's not your fault people keep secrets, Wanyin," Wen Qing said, "It was never a matter of trust. It was..." She hesitated, "He loved you too much to allow himself to become a burden."

Jiang Cheng could have been better. More understanding. He shouldn't have assumed Wei Wuxian lost less in the war. He shouldn't have tried to rationalize his behavior as normal.

He just didn't want to admit that he may have lost Wei Wuxian too.

**Jiang Yanli watched the disciples train under Jiang Cheng's supervision. She noticed when another disciple approached, pulling her brother away. She started towards them, watching as he read a letter, "I'm not available now. Go to Wei Wuxian."**

**"Wei-shixiong is not in Lotus Pier," The disciple stammered.**

**"Once again?" Jiang Cheng's temper flared, "Did he go to town again?"**

**"A-Cheng," Jiang Yanli intervened, "I'll be there in a moment. You go serve the tea. Don't slight our guests."**

**The disciple left, "Understood."**

**"Lotus Pier has been rebuilt, but everything has changed," Jiang Yanli said, "Maybe he's just not used to it."**

**"Not used to it?" Jiang Cheng echoed, "Am I used to it? He's just used to being unruly at home. So much for helping me revive the Jiang Sect, huh? I can't see his efforts at all."**

**"A-Cheng," She placed a hand on his arm, but he just went back to training.**

And so it began.

There was nothing Wei Wuxian could do to help his Sect. His mere presence gave the Jiang Sect strength, but preventing them from falling any farther wasn't the same as helping them



rise. Anything he did in the rebuilding would have been looked down upon by the rest of the cultivation world.

He protected the Jiang Sect, but anything more would have tainted it.

How frustrating.

Maybe the Jin Sect didn't have to do anything to get Wei Wuxian to snap. For a man who pulled off the impossible for his loved ones...to suddenly be useless might be the worst hell imaginable. There was nothing he could do.

Idle hands become evil's tools.

**Lan Xichen walked down the street of Yunmeng. He heard a laugh and looked up.**

**"Zewu-Jun," Wei Wuxian called down from where he was sitting in a window, drinking, "What a coincidence!"**

**"Wei-gongzi," Lan Xichen called back, "It's good to see you."**

"You came to Yunmeng, Zewu-Jun?" A-Li asked, her voice off.

Jin Zixuan noticed immediately, and sent a strange look at the Lan Sect Leader.

Zewu-Jun was tense, "Did Wei Wuxian not mention it?"

"Wei Wuxian said nothing," Jiang Wanyin sat up straighter, "Why not announce your presence?"

It was rude for any Sect to enter another's territory without announcing their presence. Just a letter was polite. Exceptions were made for night hunts, but this wasn't a night hunt. Zewu-Jun was ordered to Qishan, not Yunmeng. For neither his wife nor the Sect Leader to know about another Sect Leader's presence...well, it was suspicious and rude.

Especially for a Lan, but it looked like they were learning a lot about the Lan Sect.

It was a terrible time for them to seem less than perfect.

"I wasn't supposed to be there," Zewu-Jun admitted, "But since Wangji was..."

"Confined?" Jin Zixuan offered, because that's what it was. One of the best cultivators of their generation was on book duty instead of seeing to the lingering resentment of the war. Just to keep him away from Wei Wuxian.

"I believed I should make an attempt on his behalf," Zewu-Jun sounded...guilty?

A-Li's eyes widened, "You upset A-Xian."

Zewu-Jun's head snapped up, "If I did, it wasn't my intention. I thought Wangji's feelings were unreciprocated. I didn't think...I didn't think he cared."

“Let’s just see what happened,” A-Li dismissed, but Jin Zixuan could tell she was angry.

There were many people who insulted Wei Wuxian. Jin Zixuan was amongst them, as was his cousin. He certainly hadn’t expected Zewu-Jun to do anything to upset Wei Wuxian.

Being an overprotective sibling just seemed unnecessary when said sibling was Hanguang-Jun.

**“How come Zewu-Jun has some spare time to be in Yunmeng?” Wei Wuxian asked, “If you’re not in a rush,” He swirled his drink, “Let’s have a drink together?” Lan Xichen smiled and looked down, and Wei Wuxian laughed again, “Oh, I forgot. The Lan are forbidden to drink.”**

**“Not exactly,” Lan Xichen disagreed, and moved to go inside the tavern.**

**Lan Xichen got himself some wine and sat down. They both drained two cups.**

Lan Qiren tensed at the whispering around the room.

He should have kept both his nephews confined to Cloud Recesses and just gone to Qishan himself. Wangji? He expected to run off and find Wei Wuxian. Xichen? He’d had more hope for, especially as Lianfeng-Zun was also in Qishan to help with the post-war efforts.

He was aware of the hypocrisy. He saw his own with every statement he made of Wei Wuxian that was based more on rumor than fact.

However, he hoped to spare Xichen from the same.

“I’m sorry, Shufu,” Xichen apologized, “I shouldn’t have...”

Drank? Gone to Yunmeng? Made multiple assumptions that would ultimately hurt Wei Wuxian?

“Making mistakes is inevitable, Xichen,” Lan Qiren dismissed, “That you feel guilty about them makes you better than most here.”

Lianfeng-Zun flinched.

**“Zewu-Jun, you really can drink,” Wei Wuxian complimented, “Compared to Lan Zhan, you’re so different. It can’t be...It can’t be that Zewu-Jun drinks secretly in Cloud Recesses just like I did, right?” Lan Xichen just stared at him, and he let it drop, “Zewu-Jun, that was ill-considered. I’m sorry.”**

**“Actually, I cleanse the alcohol using my golden core,” Lan Xichen admitted, “So this can’t be counted as drinking.”**

**“Zewu-Jun, you are such a capable gentleman,” Wei Wuxian hesitated, “But...Zewu-Jun, cleansing should be Lan Zhan’s interest. Why didn’t he come along?”**

**“He was ordered to stay home and mend our family disciplines,” Lan Xichen answered.**

**Wei Wuxian choked on his drink, “That’s more than three thousand disciplines. Zewu-Jun, that is such an unbearable task. Mending so many disciplines, isn’t it the same as being imprisoned? He might be confined to the mountain for three years!”**

**Lan Xichen’s expression faltered.**

Lan Wangji understood it had been essentially an imprisonment. He just hadn’t seen it that way.

He understood his family’s concerns. Uncle hadn’t wanted him to make the same mistake as his father, even though Lan Wangji would never consider it a mistake. He knew Wei Ying’s choices were concerning. He was concerned himself.

To all these people, who didn’t know about his parents, Uncle was being too harsh.

He wondered, briefly, if his brother would be alright with informing the Jiang siblings. If he said something worthy of rebuke, then Jiang Yanli should know it came from a desire to protect. To protect him from heartbreak. To protect him from a life of condemnation and shame, had Wei Ying been as demonic as his cultivation implied.

He couldn’t blame his brother for trying.

Lan Wangji wondered if anyone ever tried to help their mother.

**“Well,” Wei Wuxian continued to muse, “I’ve been idle recently. In a couple of days, I will go with you to Cloud Recesses to visit him. Back then, he watched over me while I transcribed disciplines. Now I can be in his position.” He grinned, “That seems more fun.” He shook his head in amusement.**

**Lan Xichen set his cup down, “If Wei-gongzi would come to Gusu, how about listening to some of the music Wangji just learned?”**

**Wei Wuxian froze, setting down his cup without drinking from it.**

So close.

Zewu-Jun came so close to convincing him.

Wen Qing grimaced as Jiang Wanyin swore. It was almost funny. If Hanguang-Jun went himself, there was no way he would have been able to convince Wei Wuxian to do anything. Zewu-Jun always gave the appearance of being nonjudgmental and compassionate. It was why Wei Wuxian agreed to drink with him when he pushed everyone else away.

“Er-ge, all you had to do was keep quiet,” Nie Huaisang complained.

“I didn’t...” Zewu-Jun trailed off, then sighed, “I misjudged him.”

“Even the Yiling Patriarch cares for Zewu-Jun’s opinion,” Wen Qing said carefully, “How could anyone not?”

People were always eager to bring down heroes, but Zewu-Jun had opposed the killing of her people. Yes, he was fooled by Lianfeng-Zun into thinking it wasn't happening, and thought Hanguang-Jun was duped by Wei Wuxian, but none of that came from malice. He was a gentle person in a harsh world.

Like A-Ning. The best of intentions didn't always lead to the best results.

**"They all can clear your mind and help you concentrate," Lan Xichen continued.**

**Now suspicious, Wei Wuxian asked, "What's your intention in saying that, Zewu-Jun?"**

**"Wangji has been playing Cleansing lately. I wonder if you know why?" Lan Xichen replied.**

**"You deliberately came to Yunmeng to persuade me?" Wei Wuxian didn't smile this time as Lan Xichen shook his head, "Then you did it under someone's request." Lan Xichen shook his head again, and Wei Wuxian scoffed slightly, pouring himself more wine, "Zewu-Jun, are people in the Lan Sect so fond of meddling?"**

**Wei Wuxian grinned without warmth and downed his cup.**

Jin Guangyao found this entire exchange fascinating.

Wei Wuxian could have been convinced to go to Gusu. All Er-ge had to do was frame it as helping Hanguang-Jun. He could have played on Wei Wuxian's hero complex, if only he knew that was what was going on here.

But Er-ge thought Wei Wuxian a villain, and had to point out how there would be a cleansing if he came to Cloud Recesses.

"I'm sorry, Wangji," Er-ge apologized.

Hanguang-Jun said nothing. He didn't look upset with his older brother's failure. Then again, Er-ge did this without anyone prompting him to. He saw his younger brother's desperation and decided he had to try.

He saw his father's tragedy repeating itself and had to try.

"Even if you had the right words, Er-ge, you couldn't have convinced him," Jin Guangyao said, "Not to save himself."

His gaze flickered to Huaisang, who had only convinced Wei Wuxian to do this much because of the Wen Remnants he protected. Huaisang stared back at him, questions in his eyes that Jin Guangyao couldn't give him. It wasn't his story to share.

Though it would help explain Er-ge's behavior.

**"Wangji is my brother," Lan Xichen said, "I know his thoughts well. No matter if you listen or not, I have a few words to say."**

**Wei Wuxian tapped his cup, urging him to speak.**

**“There are set rules in this world, and goodness is in regulation,” Lan Xichen watched him drink faster, “If you were the only one in the world, you could surely do whatever at your will.” Wei Wuxian got another cup, “Unfortunately, everyone has a say in the world. I hope you won’t be so self-centered since people you care about are affected by your actions.”**

**Wei Wuxian froze.**

“Self-centered?” Jiang Yanli couldn’t help but echo.

She remembered this day. She remembered A-Cheng’s anger, and her own hopelessness at the situation. She thought A-Cheng had been short with A-Xian, and that was why he was so sad when he spoke with her in front of her parents’ memorial tablets. She should have known better. A-Xian was used to A-Cheng’s temper.

He hadn’t expected to face Zewu-Jun’s contempt.

She hadn’t expected Zewu-Jun’s contempt either. There had to be a reason, but was any reason good enough?

“A thousand apologies,” Zewu-Jun bowed his head, “I had not thought Wei Wuxian would listen to me.”

“So you threatened him?” Of course A-Cheng interpreted that exchange as a threat, “With us?”

“Please understand,” Zewu-Jun closed his eyes, “There is very little that can hurt Wangji, and even less that can break his heart. I spoke wrong out of fear and anger.”

Fear of what? The anger she could understand. She was feeling angry herself, but what was he so afraid of?

“You led A-Xian to believe his existence would cause us pain,” Jiang Yanli criticized.

“Just like Madam Yu,” Nie Huaisang added.

That was why this was upsetting her. Her mother always insisted A-Xian would bring ruin upon their family. She blamed him for the attack on Lotus Pier, blamed him for her own death and that of her husband.

To bring that up again after Wei Wuxian internalized that blame...there was no longer any question about why A-Xian left.

“I didn’t realize I would be repeating your mother’s mistake,” Zewu-Jun apologized.

Jiang Yanli caught the slight inflection on your. She suddenly realized she knew nothing of Zewu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun’s parents. Was that what Zewu-Jun was afraid of? What they were all afraid of in some way?

Repeating their parent's tragedies?

**"If you trust Wangji and me, we, the GusuLan, can help you pick up your sword again," Lan Xichen finished.**

**Wei Wuxian's eyes grew red, his smile strained, "I trust you." Then he focused on Lan Xichen, his expression hardening, "But I don't want to pick it up." He set his cup down and picked up Chenqing and the jar of wine. He started to leave.**

**"Wei-gongzi," Lan Xichen called after him, rising as well, "Demonic cultivation harms your temperament. The Stygian Tiger Amulet is hard to control. If your mind is completely lost, it will cause-"**

**"I still want to give it a shot," Wei Wuxian interrupted, raising his voice, "Maybe I am the prodigy." He waved his jar at Lan Xichen, spilling wine on the floor, then left.**

Disrespect for disrespect.

MianMian was familiar with the concept, even if she rarely got to put it into action herself.

This only cemented the bad opinion Zewu-Jun had of Wei Wuxian.

"I didn't think Xichen had it in him," Chifeng-Zun muttered.

"The drinking or the warning?" Qin Su inquired.

Chifeng-Zun just snorted, "He tends to give people the benefit of doubt."

MianMian glanced at Lianfeng-Zun, then Su Minshan. Some people definitely benefited from that doubt. No one else would have stood between Chifeng-Zun and the object of his ire. Any other Sect would have killed Su Minshan for his betrayal and cowardice.

"It's not like anyone else was giving Wei Wuxian the same benefit," Qin Su flicked her gaze at the gossiping hoard.

"No one else holds themselves to as high of standards," MianMian grimaced.

Nothing Zewu-Jun said was any worse than what everyone else gossiped about.

**Jiang Cheng was polishing his sword when Wei Wuxian wandered in with that same jar of wine. He paused, but didn't stop.**

**"Jiang Cheng, you're still awake?" Wei Wuxian asked, "Perfect. I brought you liquor."**

**"Piss off," Jiang Cheng snapped.**

**Wei Wuxian sighed, "Why are you cleaning your sword all day long?" He sat down on the steps of the throne, "How many times a day shall you clean your sword?"**

**"Where's yours?" Jiang Cheng demanded, "How long ago did you last clean it?"**

**Wei Wuxian just took a drink, “I left it in my room. Once a month should do.”**

**“Not carrying a sword in public. Drinking in a tavern all day,” Jiang Cheng listed, “Someone would presume that Lotus Pier is the inn where you rest when you’ve drunk enough.”**

**Wei Wuxian got up to follow him, wrapping an arm around him, “Don’t be so mad, Jiang Cheng.”**

**Jiang Cheng shoved him, “Go away.”**

**Wei Wuxian fell to the ground.**

**“Are you alright?” Jiang Cheng turned to him, “Too drunk to manage your spiritual power? Look at yourself.”**

**Wei Wuxian looked pale. Terrified.**

So close.

But in a different way.

Nie Huaisang could understand freezing. It was always a uniquely paralyzing fear that others would stumble upon the truth. He didn’t know how Da-ge managed to keep a straight face whenever people muttered about Baxia. Nie Huaisang could barely manage any conversation about the sabers without cringing.

Lucky for him, people thought he cringed out of shame for his inabilities.

“It’s astonishing no one found him out sooner,” Wen Qing commented.

“It’s obvious in retrospect,” Nie Huaisang agreed.

Jiang Cheng gritted his teeth. Wen Qing hesitantly placed her hand on his elbow. His fists loosened almost immediately.

Some secrets weren’t kept out of malice, but love.

Nie Huaisang was pretty sure Wen Qing was talking about herself and Wei Wuxian. Other people kept secrets for less savory reasons.

**“Saying something about reviving the Jiang Sect with me,” Jiang Cheng continued to complain, stepping closer to offer a hand.**

**“Stay there,” Wei Wuxian thrust Chenqing between them.**

**Jiang Cheng frowned, “What do you mean? Do you want to fight?”**

**Wei Wuxian’s arm trembled as he brought it down, “I’m tired,” He used Chenqing to stand, “We can fight tomorrow.” He stumbled, “I’ll go to sleep.” Then he shakily left.**

Lan Xichen felt a now familiar rush of shame.

If it weren't for him, Wei Wuxian would have navigated this conversation better. He wouldn't have left their disaster of a conversation only to be reminded of how risky his situation was in Lotus Pier.

"I'm not angry, Xiongzhong," Wangji assured him.

"You never threatened A-Yao," Lan Xichen pointed out.

His brother stared at him blankly.

"I know," Lan Xichen sighed, "It was different."

It didn't stop everyone else from being angry and disappointed with him. Even though Jiang Wanyin's own behavior towards Wei Wuxian took some of the edge off the comments on his own.

"They don't understand," A-Yao explained gently, "With your history--"

"We don't speak of it," Uncle interjected.

Lan Xichen considered the suggestion for what it was. The cultivation world knew the Lan Sect was romantic. They told stories about how the Lan Sect was founded because of true love. Their parent's tragedy was just an extension of that. Both of them were long dead now, and while it wouldn't make their elders look any better...

They'd watched others do worse.

Was that reason enough to share this?

**Except he didn't go to his room. Jiang Yanli was sitting in the ancestral shrine, cleaning her parent's tablets when Wei Wuxian stumbled in.**

**"Shijie," He got her attention.**

**She wiped away her tears, "A-Xian. Come here."**

**Wei Wuxian obeyed, setting down the jar before entering.**

**"Did you and A-Cheng quarrel again?" Jiang Yanli asked.**

**"I've gotten used to quarreling with him," Wei Wuxian said, "It's not a big deal. We'll be fine in two days. Don't worry."**

**"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli didn't look at him, "Are you..." She trailed off then looked up at him, "Are you tired of staying in Lotus Pier?"**

**"If he wanted to leave, would you have let him?" Jin Zixuan asked.**



“I just want him to be happy,” Jiang Yanli answered, “When we were younger I thought he would leave to seek Baoshan Sanren. And then Hanguang-Jun came into his life...”

Qin Su wondered if that was just the way a woman would look at it. All these men, they never thought about leaving home. Why would they? It wasn't like men would one day be married off and have to leave their homes. They were the heirs, the ones who would run things after their parents were gone.

Women were raised to believe they'd find their happiness elsewhere.

Of course Jiang Yanli would be compelled to ask Wei Wuxian if he would be happy elsewhere.

**Wei Wuxian hurried over, “Shijie, what are you talking about? Lotus Pier is my home. If I don't stay here, where else do you think I can go?”**

**“I didn't mean that,” Jiang Yanli replied, “I was just afraid...”**

**“Shijie,” Wei Wuxian leaned closer, “If Jiang-shushu hadn't adopted me at that time, I'm afraid I'd still be begging along the streets. No matter what happens, I won't leave Lotus Pier and I definitely won't leave you and Jiang Cheng.” He grabbed her hands, “Shijie. I know I've been reckless recently. I'll change. I won't do it again. Please don't be mad at me.”**

No matter what happens.

Wen Qing wished that was a promise he could have fulfilled. She squeezed Jiang Wanyin's arm tighter in consolation.

Wei Wuxian was trying for their sake. He was trying to put aside all the negativity and be who Jiang Yanli and Jiang Wanyin expected him to be. He was completely removed from all discussions about the Wen Sect's fate. He had no way of knowing what circumstances he would be faced with that led him to break that promise.

“I gave him a way out,” Wen Qing admitted.

“What?” Jiang Wanyin glanced at her.

“Right after your visit,” Wen Qing looked down, “I told him to leave.”

“But Wen Ning wasn't awake yet,” More tension bled out of Jiang Wanyin.

“I didn't want to get my brother back...” She shakily inhaled, “At the cost of your brother.”

It hadn't resulted in anything. Wei Wuxian stayed. Jiang Wanyin spread the word that Wei Wuxian was no longer a member of the Jiang Sect. She'd gotten A-Ning back, and Wei Wuxian got a year of miserable separation.

“Thank you,” Jiang Wanyin whispered.

**Jiang Yanli wiped her tears again and smiled, “You little fool.” She touched his head, “How can I be mad at you?” He nuzzled into her touch, “Don’t you remember that when we were little?”**

**“I don’t,” He chuckled, “But I remember what you told me.”**

**“You were born with a smiling face,” Jiang Yanli repeated, “Always smiling. You never linger too long on sorrowful things. No matter how bad your situation is, you can always be happy.” She placed her hand on his, “Only with that kind of temperament can you stand A-Cheng’s bad temper.”**

**“Shijie, I don’t have a good temper at all,” Wei Wuxian wheedled, “It’s all because of you. If not for your sake, I would have been beaten to death a hundred times by Jiang Cheng.”**

**They both laughed, “Silly,” Jiang Yanli smiled, “Don’t judge A-Cheng from his looks. In fact, he cares so much about you in his heart.” She looked away, “Now, our parents are gone. We are the closest three in the world.”**

Lan Wangji remembered his brief visit to Yiling.

Even then, Wei Ying was smiling. It was something he considered deceptive for a time. He smiled when they fought on the rooftop. He smiled while a cannibal statue was trying to kill them. He smiled when they were trapped in the Xuanwu cave. He smiled after he was unconscious for three days after defeating Wen Ruohan.

Why would Wei Ying smile unless he was completely happy?

Or was that just because Lan Wangji didn’t smile except in the rarest of circumstances?

He closed his eyes for a brief moment. It wasn’t the reassurance he wished for. Wei Ying would find happiness in the worst circumstances. How was Lan Wangji ever to tell if he was genuinely happy or just making the best of things?

**Wei Wuxian’s eyes teared up, and he bent to press his forehead on their joined hands, sniffing, “Shijie. I’m hungry.”**

**His absurdity startled a laugh out of her, “Why do you still act like a child?”**

**Wei Wuxian rested his chin on their hands, “XianXian is three!”**

**Jiang Yanli laughed and stroked his hair until he drew back, continuing to sniffle, “Right, Shijie. I have a question I’ve been holding on to for a long time.”**

**Jiang Yanli wiped at her eyes, “Then ask.”**

**“Why would a person like another person?” Wei Wuxian asked, “I mean, to like them so much.”**

There was only one person that question could refer to.

Zewu-Jun's visit to Yunmeng all but confirmed it.

There was no doubt anymore that the Yiling Patriarch loved Hanguang-Jun. Even if he could only confess to liking him so much.

It only added to the torment of his circumstances. He couldn't help his Sect. Both his siblings were worrying over him, but he couldn't let them too close or they'd discover what was truly wrong. Everyone outside of Lotus Pier was slowly turning on him because of the potentially botched investigation the Jin Sect was running into the Yin Iron.

Why add a forbidden romance on top of that?

Love wasn't something that needed a reason. It simply was.

**"Why are you suddenly asking this?" Jiang Yanli inquired, "Do you have someone in your heart?"**

**"Ah, no, Shijie," Wei Wuxian denied, "I haven't got one." He reconsidered, "At least, there's no need to like a person that much. Isn't that like haltering your own neck?"**

**Jiang Yanli laughed again, "Three years old is an exaggeration." She tapped his nose, "XianXian is one."**

**"No, I'm three," Wei Wuxian insisted playfully, "Three-year-old XianXian is hungry."**

**"There is soup in the kitchen," Jiang Yanli said, "Go have some." Then leaned on one hand, "I just don't know if one-year-old XianXian can reach the cooking bench."**

**"If I can't, I have my Shijie here to hold me up," Wei Wuxian replied.**

**"You're talking nonsense," Jiang Yanli teased.**

Jin Guangyao regretted not giving Jiang Yanli a chance.

He just saw her as an extension of Jin Zixuan for so long. He assumed she would support her husband and mother-in-law and treat him poorly. Then she was living in Koi Tower, and he saw her every day. She never did anything to insult him. She was kind, though he'd just assumed she was being polite.

Now that he looked back, he saw the chances. She was separated from her brothers, and it wasn't the same role a husband could fill.

Jiang Yanli would have treated him like a brother if he had accepted any of her invitations.

She was a great sister.

**Wei Wuxian got up, and found Jiang Cheng listening outside the door. He leaned on a pillar, "Hey. Isn't it shameful for a grown-up to eavesdrop on others?"**

**“I wasn’t,” Jiang Cheng denied, “Now that I own the whole Lotus Pier, I can be wherever I want. You can’t stop me.”**

**Wei Wuxian walked up to him, “Shijie told me she made lotus root and rib soup for me. Where is it?”**

**“It’s finished,” Jiang Cheng answered, “There are only lotus roots left. Go fetch it if you want.”**

**Wei Wuxian wrapped an arm around him and hit his stomach, “You’d better throw it up!”**

**“I can throw it up,” Jiang Cheng’s eyes widened, “But you have to eat it if I do.”**

**Wei Wuxian stuck a hand out, “Okay. Just do it. Throw it up.”**

**Jiang Cheng leaned over his hand and gagged.**

**“Stop it, you two,” Jiang Yanli scolded, “How old are you? Quarreling over some ribs. I’ll make another pot.” They all smiled, “A-Cheng, didn’t you lose your Sect Leader demeanour?”**

**Jiang Cheng fixed his robes and stuck his chest out, unable to keep his growing smile hidden as he burst out laughing. They all joined him.**

MianMian laughed.

The three of them were too cute. Truly the best siblings out of the major Sects. Yes, there were secrets and promises that couldn’t be kept, but that was just life.

“Jiang-zongzhu looks so handsome when he’s happy,” Qin Su murmured.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” MianMian grinned, “I’m sure he’ll marry Wen Qing.”

Qin Su rolled her eyes, “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Uhuh,” The rogue cultivator nudged her.

“Can you two not discuss such matters?” Chifeng-Zun requested.

“Don’t you ever think about marriage?” Qin Su asked.

Chifeng-Zun scoffed.

What a pity that if the Nie brothers had their way, neither of them would get married. Then again, it seemed like the men of their generation needed a miracle to get them in red. They were completely useless on their own.

**“Right, do you still remember you said that when I became Sect Leader, you’d assist me with all your heart just like your father did mine?” Jiang Cheng asked, this time**

**without the bitterness.**

**Wei Wuxian's smile died, "Of course I do. There are the Twin Jades of Gusu. We are the Twin Heroes of Yunmeng."**

**"Don't drag me down," Jiang Cheng scolded playfully.**

**Wei Wuxian punched his stomach again, "When did I drag you down?"**

**Jiang Cheng elbowed him.**

Jiang Cheng shouldn't have let his guard down.

He thought this was the cornerstone and everything would return to how it should be. They both reached their limit of emotional honesty for the month and were fine.

He wasn't sure how to respond to what Wen Qing said. A part of him just scoffed. It didn't matter that Wen Qing gave him permission to leave. Wei Wuxian would never abandon her and her people to die. Another part of him was grateful she understood how important his siblings were to him.

The others feared losing their brothers.

Wen Qing actually lost hers, then got him back.

Jiang Cheng idiotically let his go, and he hoped by the time this was all done he could also get his back. In whatever condition the idiot was in. Then they could be idiots together back where they belonged. And if Hanguang-Jun was there too, well, Jiang Cheng could enjoy making him grovel for his permission to marry Wei Wuxian.

He never should have let the world convince him Wei Wuxian dragged him down.

**Jiang Yanli left them alone to go make soup. They stared out over the Lotus pond.**

**"Right, in a month, it'll be the Phoenix Mountain Crowd Hunt," Jiang Cheng mused, "This is the first crowd hunt of all Sects since the Sunshot Campaign ended. You'd better behave yourself when we are in Lanling. Especially stay clear of Jin Zixuan. He's the only son of Jin Guangshan after all. Their future successor. Their future Sect Leader."**

**"As a Sect Leader, what should I do if you two start fighting?" Jiang Cheng wondered, "Should I help you fight him? Should I punish you?"**

**Wei Wuxian sighed, "There's Jin Guangyao, right? I didn't talk to him much, but from my perspective, he is a much more pleasant person than the peacock."**

**"Pleasant doesn't mean much," Jiang Cheng said, "No matter how pleasant and smart he is, he could only be a servant in charge of greeting guests. He won't go any further in his whole life. He cannot compare with Jin Zixuan."**

Jin Zixuan flinched at the statement.

Of course Wei Wuxian had a favorable opinion of Guangyao. The times they met were all favorable. Guangyao stepped in front of Nie Huaisang while Wen Chao threatened everyone. Guangyao arrived to arrest Xue Yang. Wei Wuxian found him injured in the attack on Qinghe.

Wei Wuxian watched him kill Wen Ruohan, almost saving his life in the process.

Compared to every single mistake Jin Zixuan made in front of him, why wouldn't he root for Guangyao to be the Jin Sect Heir even if it was impossible?

Would it hurt Wei Wuxian to realize he'd been wrong? The Jin brother he liked was the one scheming against him. They weren't friends, but it was still a form of betrayal.

**Wei Wuxian turned to face him, growing more serious, "Jiang Cheng, what were you thinking when we were in Nightless City? You really wanted Shijie and him..."**

**"It wasn't unacceptable," Jiang Cheng turned away.**

**"It wasn't unacceptable?" Wei Wuxian repeated, "Don't you know what he did during the Sunshot Campaign? You're telling me now that was acceptable?"**

**"He probably regrets it," Jiang Cheng dismissed.**

**"Who cares if he regrets it?" Wei Wuxian scoffed, "Do you have to forgive when an apology comes? Besides," Wei Wuxian crossed his arms, "Look at his father, fooling around with so many women. Jin Zixuan might take after his father and hang out with women everywhere. If Shijie were with him, could you stand that?"**

**"How dare he!" Jiang Cheng snapped.**

Some did glance at Jin Guangshan.

They'd forgiven him without him even apologizing. They all were aware of the prostitutes and other women who would hang off of him. He was shameless in the worst way.

They were lucky Jin Zixuan didn't take after his father.

**They both cooled down.**

**"The decision of whether he is forgiven or not shouldn't be made by us," Jiang Cheng reasoned, "A-Jie likes him."**

**Wei Wuxian let out a frustrated huff, "I just can't understand. Why did Shijie choose to like this-" He cut himself off.**

Jiang Yanli smiled at her husband.

While it hadn't been her choice to fall in love, it was her choice to forgive. She chose to believe A-Xuan was more than he appeared to be. She chose to believe he regretted every harsh criticism he said to her. She chose to believe he'd changed and grown past the insecurities of his youth.

Her brothers hadn't seen it yet, but she hoped they would. Especially as A-Xuan was more open now.

A-Xian didn't choose to love Hanguang-Jun, and he obviously chose to ignore those feelings rather than let them guide him. It was sad to see him so frustrated and confused about love when his should have been so simple.

Then again, his complications were now obvious.

Hanguang-Jun's were less so. It wasn't in his nature to make grand romantic declarations, nor did his family approve of the match. Yet she didn't think those alone were what was stopping Hanguang-Jun. She was desperately curious what else happened to make him choose restraint. She had a feeling only a handful in this room could tell her.

If they were to be family, shouldn't she know? How could she help if she didn't know?

Wasn't that the whole point of them all being here?

**A few days later, as Wei Wuxian and Jiang Yanli brought in lotus pods with their disciples, they ran into Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan.**

**"Jiang Cheng, you are just in..." Wei Wuxian trailed off.**

**Jiang Yanli's smile fell, and Jiang Cheng looked between her and Jin Zixuan. Then he made eye contact with Wei Wuxian and cocked his head in a silent question. Wei Wuxian just frowned.**

**"I'm here to deliver an invitation," Jin Zixuan claimed, as soon as they were settled in the Sword Hall, "We'd like to invite the Jiang Sect to Phoenix Mountain to participate in the crowd hunt."**

**Wei Wuxian waved his flute, "Jin-gongzi even came in person just for something as little as delivering an invitation. It seems that the YunmengJiang is really respected."**

**Jin Zixuan looked away, "This is my mother's order. She sincerely hopes that Jiang-guniang will also come along to watch the hunt." He looked back at her.**

**As did everyone else.**

**Jiang Yanli set down her cup, "With Madam Jin's kind invitation, I...would like to accept."**

**"That's great!" Jin Zixuan brightened, and when Jiang Yanli looked at him composed himself, "I mean that my mother will be so delighted to see you."**

**Jiang Yanli bowed her head in disappointment.**

**Wei Wuxian sent a bewildered look towards Jiang Cheng, who just averted his gaze.**

Neither brother said anything.

Nie Mingjue shared a look with Xichen. The significance was not lost on him.

Each of the Jiang siblings fell in love. Each of the siblings faced difficulties in said love. Circumstances led them to believe they couldn't be with who they wanted.

But Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan were only separated by misunderstandings.

They didn't have to deal with condemnation from the cultivation world or their own family. The Jiang siblings would support each other in any relationship. If Wei Wuxian were a little more honest with himself, then Jiang Yanli and Jiang Wanyin wouldn't have stopped until he got what he wanted. Similarly with Jiang Wanyin.

Nie Mingjue didn't even know what Huaisang's thoughts were on marriage.

One of them had to continue their line.

Nie Mingjue knew it wouldn't be him. Putting the responsibility on Huaisang wasn't his intention, but he also hadn't wanted to push a nephew or niece on him to raise with his widow after he died. He knew now that Huaisang wasn't as frivolous as he pretended to be. Surely he'd given the matter thought.

If he had, then it was yet another secret between them.

**Jin Zixuan bowed his head in embarrassment, then got up to take his leave.**

**Jiang Yanli and Wei Wuxian led him out silently. Once they were outside Lotus Pier, she turned to him, "Jin-gongzi, please forgive us for not seeing you off."**

**Jin Zixuan looked like he was trying to figure out what to say.**

**"Jin-gongzi," Wei Wuxian interrupted, "Haven't you heard?" He gestured for him to leave, "Please."**

**Jin Zixuan rolled his eyes, and didn't manage to say anything before Jiang Yanli left. He stared after her.**

**Wei Wuxian moved to block his view, "Why do you keep looking at me? Am I that good looking?"**

Nie Huaisang snorted. Jin Zixuan was lucky Wei Wuxian didn't shove him in the lake.

"Have you ever tried to court anyone, Nie Huaisang?" Jin Zixuan demanded.

"Me?" He tilted his head, "Why would I?"



He was just the carefree Young Master of Qinghe. He wasn't renowned for being powerful. Most saw him as pathetic, and thus not a suitable match. It would all change once he was Sect Leader, so that's what he waited for. Otherwise, it was a little too deceptive, even for him.

Sure, it was a romantic notion to find someone who loved him even as he was now, but it felt false. They'd marry him because he loved the arts and spent his free time with the birds. Then Da-ge would die and he'd finally start showing his true colors as Sect Leader...it would be like marrying a different man entirely.

A part of him wanted Da-ge to be at his wedding. Another part of him didn't want Da-ge around any of his hypothetical children because he wanted to spare them the pain of losing him.

He'd given the matter too much and too little thought, ultimately just not pursuing anyone.

It was so easy for these sorts of things to take a turn for the worst.

**Jin Zixuan scoffed and made to leave. Then he hesitated again.**

**"Do you have any business to talk to me about?" Wei Wuxian drew closer.**

**"Wei-gongzi," Jin Zixuan turned back to him, "My father reminded me to ask you something during my visit. When you and Lan-er-gongzi pursued the Yin Iron, you bound Xue Yang in the Unclean Realm. Now the three other shards have been destroyed. Wei-gongzi, do you know where the last one is?"**

**"Why are you asking me this?" Wei Wuxian evaded.**

**"Just answer my question," Jin Zixuan demanded, "Why do you have so many questions?"**

**"Jin-gongzi, are you exercising your authority now?" Wei Wuxian wondered.**

**"You-" Jin Zixuan jutted his sword at him, then lowered it, "Wei-gongzi, my father needs to investigate the Yin Iron. If you don't want to help, then forget it. Besides, during the Sunshot Campaign, the power of the Stygian Tiger Amulet affected our cultivators. I hope you can hand it in at the banquet after the night hunt, so those affected can feel safe."**

**Then he finally left.**

The Jiang siblings had finally returned home. They were finally happy.

Events were still happening in the outside world though. Steadily, the cultivation world was turning against Wei Wuxian. It was obvious from Lan Qiren's condemnation to Zewu-Jun's contempt and now Jin Zixuan's brief interrogation.

Wei Wuxian didn't have to do anything. He was literally doing nothing but existing in Lotus Pier. He wasn't using the Amulet or other forms of demonic cultivation. Nor was it having

such an obvious effect on him. This whole time, they hadn't heard any of the whispers that tormented him throughout the Sunshot Campaign.

Peace had been good for him.

So someone, somewhere, disturbed it.

The Crowd Hunt was coming up, and almost everyone was certain it was the Jin Sect that led to this misery.

## Chapter End Notes

I have decided on a tentative plan for the ending. As much as I want to ask for approval, I also do not want to spoil the story.

Sorry to disappoint but this does follow CQL so there will not be a kissing scene on Phoenix Mountain. I don't like to mix canons. Long story short, my father always made me watch older versions of movies before watching remakes. They made a new Magnificent Seven, so I had to watch Seven Samurai, then the older Magnificent Seven, then the Samurai 7 anime...

Call it a coping mechanism, but when you're forced to consume multiple versions of similar stories, you learn to appreciate the little things that make them different. So I personally struggle with mixing canons.

I hope to finish this story by the end of the year! Thank you all for being patient and sticking with it!

# Did Anyone Actually Get Around to Hunting?

## Chapter Summary

No. Not really.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

**Disciples of all Sects gathered before an archery range.**

It was a jump from the invitation to the event, but it only proved the point that Wei Wuxian was up to nothing in Lotus Pier.

**Wei Wuxian waved excitedly at his Shijie as she walked in with Madam Jin. Jiang Yanli hid her smile behind a fan. The major Sect leaders greeted each other and took their seats.**

**Jin Guangyao bowed to his father, then descended the stairs to say, “Everyone here must know the rules already. I want to highlight again that,” He pointed, “This row of targets is the first barrier before entering the mountain. Only participants who hit one of the targets from the required distance can receive their entrance ticket.”**

**“The target has several circles,” Jin Guangyao continued, “Which correspond to seven mountain paths. The closer your arrow is to the bullseye, the easier the way will be. And this year, we have designed a special activity to delight our guests.” His smile fell, and he gestured to the Jin disciples.**

**They herded Wen disciples in front of the targets.**

Knowing what they did now, everyone wondered if this was a deliberate provocation.

Though who it was meant to provoke was another matter.

Was it the Jin Sect flaunting their authority already? Did they want to see what they could get away with before someone protested? Was it like the Wen Sect summoning the heirs to Indoctrination?

**Wei Wuxian stopped playing with Chenqing, his grip tightened with anger. Lan Wangji stared at the prisoners, before turning back to Wei Wuxian.**

**“If someone stood before the target, it would be more difficult to hit,” Jin Guangyao explained, “Your skills shall be tested then.”**

**Wei Wuxian looked away from the prisoners to glare at him, stepping forward.**

**Jiang Cheng half raised a hand in warning, then shook his head.**

**Wei Wuxian's hand unclenched, and he fell back in line.**

Jin Guangyao fiddled with his sleeve. There was a process to how monsters disguised themselves amongst men. The first was to find a void in their targets' lives and fill it. The cultivation world needed a leader after Wen Ruohan. They needed money after the war caused so much damage. Jin Guangshan provided the solution to both.

Then came the tests. How many people could they kill in Qishan with all the Sects present? Would they notice? Would they care enough to object? That close to the war, even if Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun lodged their protests most would have looked the other way.

But this was further away from the war. Could they still get away with it? This portion was crucial, because if no one objected, then it would later make them feel as though they were part of this. Later, when Wei Wuxian finally snapped, people sided with them, because they didn't want to acknowledge the wrong they already participated in with the Crowd Hunt.

Once they felt part of it, they were more reluctant to oppose it.

It was a difficult cycle to break, but an easy one to escalate.

**Jin Guangyao looked at Jin Zixuan, who scoffed, "It's not difficult at all."**

**Jin Zixuan approached the targets. He traded out his sword for a bow, then took to the air. From that height, he was still the required distance, but less likely to hit the prisoners. He hit the center of the target with ease, then landed on the ground again. He took his sword back and went back to his previous position.**

At the time, Jin Zixuan thought that was an act of defiance.

He shot the target, but in a manner certain to not hit any of the Wen disciples.

It wasn't enough. He knew it was wrong. Otherwise he would have shot from the ground like it was set up to do. He just hadn't cared. He wanted the crowd hunt to start so he could try to impress A-Li.

He'd been such a blind idiot.

**"Whoever wants to take on the challenge," Jin Zixun stepped forward, "Just step forward. I'm looking forward to seeing who will have a better shot than that." He stared directly at Wei Wuxian, before turning to the rest of the gathering, "Anyone else?"**

"Provoking Wei-xiong again," Nie Huaisang shook his head, "It's like you wanted him to act up."

There were murmurs of agreement. Sure, this was the Jin Sect testing to see what they could get away with, but he had to remind them this was also the Jin Sect deliberately pushing Wei Wuxian to act. They wanted him to do something so they could blow it out of proportion. They needed to have him make a spectacle so people would remember he existed.

They needed something to fuel the rumors.

Suddenly, hosting the Crowd Hunt so soon after the end of the Sunshot Campaign wasn't such a generous act.

"He's an arrogant monster," Jin Zixun glowered.

That was obviously untrue.

Jiang Cheng snorted, "Speak ill of him again without evidence and I'll have your hide."

**Wei Wuxian turned to Lan Wangji, "Lan Zhan, do me a favor."**

**"What?" Lan Wangji met his gaze.**

**Wei Wuxian glanced up at his forehead ribbon, "Can I borrow it?"**

**Jiang Cheng sighed heavily.**

**Lan Wangji turned away without answering.**

Which pointedly wasn't a no.

"That would have been fun," MianMian commented.

Even if it certainly would have resulted in Hanguang-Jun being forced to remove himself from the competition. Wei Wuxian may have a selective memory, but everyone else who attended the lectures knew what the forehead ribbon meant to the Lan Sect.

If Hanguang-Jun stormed off after Wei Wuxian took his ribbon in public, everyone would have thought it was a deliberate display of disrespect. They'd curse Wei Wuxian's name more while secretly being happy about their improved odds in the Crowd Hunt.

But if Hanguang-Jun let Wei Wuxian take his ribbon without protest? The resulting confusion may have been enough to call off the farce of the entrance test.

"I don't think Hanguang-Jun would be so shameless," Qin Su replied.

"In public," Chifeng-Zun muttered.

MianMian snorted.

Back then, Hanguang-Jun wasn't willing to put his heart out on the line for someone he wasn't sure loved him back. Now, she couldn't say what he would do. He definitely wouldn't let Wei Wuxian get away from him, and it took a lot of shamelessness to be clingy.

**Wei Wuxian pouted, looked around, then approached the targets. He stuck Chenqing in his belt and unraveled the cloth around his forearm. He used that to blind himself.**

**Everyone else exchanged worried looks.**

**Wei Wuxian just blindly took his bow and grabbed five arrows. He cocked his head, then spun around and fired his shot.**

**All five arrows found the center of their targets.**

**Jiang Cheng let out a deep sigh of relief.**

**Nie Mingjue clapped the loudest, and the other Sect Leaders joined him. Then the disciples followed their lead.**

**Wei Wuxian removed the blindfold and started wrapping the cloth back around his sleeve. He smiled at his sister as he passed and took back his spot next to Lan Wangji.**

“All without a golden core,” Jin Guangshan was impressed.

They were getting closer to Qiongqi Pass. It was obvious by now that Jin Zixun would have to bear the brunt of the immediate consequences of that. Of course he would then allow them to investigate, but at this point there was no point.

Jin disciples had already seen to it that all the resentment from Qiongqi was purged. All the corpses were moved. He doubted there would even be much left of the prison structure.

As for the guards, all were released from his employ as soon as they were no longer needed.

If they couldn't find any to interrogate...well, it wasn't any of Jin Guangshan's business what happened to people after they no longer worked for him. Maybe they couldn't bear the guilt of their actions. Maybe they were driven to madness by Wei Wuxian. Maybe they decided to keep their heads down and live a quiet life.

It was so hard to keep track of people once they dropped out of society.

Stalling was what he did best. He could stall until he consolidated enough power. He'd have to remind both of his sons what their place was. A-Xuan was a father now. Did he really want to disturb the peace with little Ling-er's life on the line? A-Yao would need a firmer reminder that everything he had in life was because of Jin Guangshan.

One of the other three major Sects would take in the Wen Remnants. It wouldn't be easy to integrate them, so they would likely be given their own place outside the Sect. Vulnerable.

Another would take in Wei Wuxian. Who knew how he would respond to everyone knowing of his sacrifice? Would them knowing make him any less reluctant to accept help? Even if he did, destroying the Amulet would take a lot of effort. Another vulnerability.

Surely with so many other problems to deal with, his 'crimes' could be overlooked? Even Nie Mingjue knew better than to challenge the Chief Cultivator without support. It wasn't

like anyone actually cared about what happened at Qiongqi Pass.

Then he could get back to what truly mattered to him.

**Jin Guangyao just smiled, “The opening shot is to warm you up. Of course you are all qualified to participate. So how about cancelling this ceremony.” He gestured the other way, “Please start the hunt now.”**

**Wei Wuxian fixed his hair.**

**“That’s just an opening shot,” Jin Zixun drew closer, “Practice your showy tricks. So you covered your eyes, how about covering them for the whole hunt if you are really that capable? We’ll see how capable you are and who the winner will be later.”**

**Wei Wuxian didn’t look at him.**

**Jin Zixun stormed off.**

**They entered the mountain.**

If Wei Wuxian had just told him...

Jiang Cheng took a deep breath. Here he thought Wei Wuxian just showed off for the drama of it. He should have known it was all provoked. If Jin Zixun had just kept his mouth shut.

“If he hadn’t done that, others would have shot in the archery contest,” Wen Qing whispered.

His mouth twisted at the realization. If Wei Wuxian hadn’t made an impossible shot that no one could hope to follow, others would have followed. Maybe the Jiang Sect disciples could have all made the shot without hitting any people, but their Sect specifically practiced archery. So did many of the Jin Sect.

But the Lan Sect? The Nie Sect? He wasn’t sure he’d ever seen a disciple of either use a bow. If a Lan disciple wanted a weapon with further range, they turned to musical cultivation. He didn’t think the Nie ever cared about long distance. They’d just throw their sabers if they couldn’t stab it with them.

Between potentially killing a prisoner and not being able to compete in the Crowd Hunt, most of those disciples would have chosen to pick up their bows and fire.

Until Wei Wuxian made it unnecessary by cancelling the opening ceremony.

**Wei Wuxian immediately separated from his group. He wandered until he found a nice place to sit. He raised Chenqing to his lips and began to play. It wasn’t like his previous music. It echoed down the mountain in a haunting melody, designed to lure, to convince, instead of attack.**

**Jiang Cheng hunted not too far away. One of his disciples approached nervously, “Zongzhu.”**

**“What happened?” Jiang Cheng demanded.**

**“Just now, all the beasts and resentful spirits appear to be controlled by someone,” The disciple reported, “They plunged into our nets themselves.”**

**“What’s happening?” Jiang Cheng muttered to himself, but they could still hear the flute’s melody. He sheathed his sword, “I told you not to overdo it.”**

Was it really overdoing it?

They’d seen the toll demonic cultivation took on him. Compared to the war, this didn’t seem to tax him at all. It didn’t trigger the voices in his head. It didn’t even cause resentment to curl around his body like another layer of clothing.

Maybe that was just how powerful Wei Wuxian was.

**Wei Wuxian eventually stopped playing. His expression was sad, but it lit up when he noticed Lan Wangji passing back. He opened his mouth to call out, when Lan Xichen’s words came to memory, “*There are set rules in this world. I hope you won’t be so self-centered since people you care about are affected by your actions.*”**

**Wei Wuxian turned away.**

Lan Xichen let out a wounded noise. Those were his words.

His words caused Wei Wuxian to further turn away from Wangji. His words were probably on his mind when he chose to go off alone. Not that he would have been able to help with this hunt in any traditional way.

“I’m sorry, Wangji,” He apologized again.

He knew it would only get worse from here. He hated that he’d had any part in furthering the misunderstandings that hurt them both.

He hated that his attempts to avoid their parent’s tragedy only seemed to make it come to life.

**Lan Wangji paused, and turned, catching sight of him anyways.**

**Wei Wuxian turned back and froze, rising to his feet, “Lan Zhan, I heard you are tired of mending your family rules in Cloud Recesses.”**

**“I made some progress in composing a music score and I wanted to share it with you,” Lan Wangji replied, “To see how it works.”**

**Wei Wuxian sighed, “Lan Wangji, Lan Wangji, who do you take me for? Can’t you leave me alone?”**

Back to Lan Wangji instead of Lan Zhan.



Just like when he'd first returned from the Burial Mounds. A simple way to express a desire for distance. A warning that Lan Wangji was getting too close. Too close was dangerous. Too close risked his secrets being discovered. Too close meant the potential to become a casualty when the world came crashing down around him again.

If only Lan Wangji had understood that earlier.

For six months he'd been working on mending the disciples. Any and all free time was dedicated to mastering various scores that had the potential to help Wei Ying. He'd even snuck into the forbidden chamber and been punished for it, not that he dared show where it was to so many outsiders.

He wasn't sure how much time he would have during the Crowd Hunt, so he went directly to his point. He didn't have time for Wei Ying's teasing or attempts at distraction. At any moment, a Lan disciple could have found him, and then the incident would be reported to Uncle.

Lan Wangji just needed to be more careful next time.

**"Who do you take me for?" Lan Wangji threw his words right back at him.**

**Wei Wuxian inhaled shakily, but considered the question. He glanced down at Chenqing, his posturing falling away to sincerity, "I once considered you my soulmate."**

**"I still am," Lan Wangji promised.**

"When he called you soulmates, he meant equals," Nie Huaisang commented.

Equality was what led to the rest. They could keep up with each other, thus Wei Wuxian could help with the quest for Yin Iron. They were far more powerful than their peers, which was why the two of them alone could take on the Xuanwu. They were equals, so they could understand each other in a way the others couldn't.

"Now..." Lianfeng-Zun trailed off, "How can he be your equal with no golden core?"

"That doesn't matter to me," Hanguang-Jun said.

"It matters to him," Lianfeng-Zun replied.

Wei Wuxian wanted the best for Hanguang-Jun. He didn't consider himself the best anymore.

**Wei Wuxian's eyes flickered back up to him, then slid back down. He lifted Chenqing up between them, considering something. It brought a small smile to his face, then he met Lan Wangji's piercing gaze again.**

The desire to explain was obvious.

Nie Mingjue could understand. If he'd had a soulmate who sought him out in the middle of a competition because he otherwise would never be allowed to, who also suspected he was

doing something dangerous with resentment, he too would have been tempted to cave at such certainty in their bond.

This was why he never let Xichen get close to suspecting.

“How...?” He couldn’t finish the question.

How had this not ended up clearing the misunderstanding between them? How had this ended with them further apart than before?

**Before Wei Wuxian could say anything, he heard a noise. He grabbed Lan Wangji’s arm, and pulled him away to hide behind some bushes.**

**Jin Zixuan walked by with Jiang Yanli in silence.**

“Ah,” Jiang Yanli sighed, “That’s how.”

They were interrupted.

What else could have stopped this but the sight of her with A-Xuan?

“Of course he couldn’t have just ignored us,” Her husband muttered.

“It was technically improper,” Jiang Yanli pointed out.

They shouldn’t have been together unsupervised. A-Xian knew A-Xuan wasn’t that kind of man, but propriety was propriety. She could also take care of herself, but if it had been under any other circumstances, this wouldn’t have been allowed. Especially since A-Xuan intended to court her.

A-Xian was in the right to linger. If anything, he would have been in the right to immediately barge in and demand what A-Xuan was doing out there alone with her.

But he didn’t. He hid himself and Hanguang-Jun. He didn’t interfere.

**“I guessed that Madam Jin would ask Shijie to come out alone with Jin Zixuan,” Wei Wuxian whispered.**

**Jin Zixuan stopped to look at some tracks and other evidence. He knelt down, “This place is dangerous. There is still mucus left by the Measuring Snake.”**

**“What is that?” Jiang Yanli asked.**

**“A demon snake that came from the southern region,” Jin Zixuan stood, “It will lift its upper body to compare its length with a man’s stature. If it’s taller, it will swallow the man. It may look scary, but there’s nothing to be afraid of.”**

**Wei Wuxian cringed and rolled his eyes.**

**“This one has scales on it,” Jin Zixuan continued, “It may be a variation that is hard for a common man to deal with, yet, in this night hunt, this prey is so common. They can’t hurt the disciples of the LanlingJin.”**

**Wei Wuxian scoffed and shook his head in disbelief.**

Qin Su likewise cringed, “Is this supposed to be romantic?”

Luo Qingyang tilted her head, “That depends. Is it attractive for a man to be able to protect you?”

Chifeng-Zun frowned, “Don’t you want a strong husband?”

“Not if they’re going to be overbearing about it,” Her friend mockingly deepened her voice, “Oh, Luo-guniang, I’ll protect you. How about a kiss to repay me?” She made a disgusted face, “I’m strong enough to defend me and my future spouse. I’d rather a man be strong in other ways.”

Qin Su smiled slightly, “Like emotionally?”

“Definitely,” Luo Qingyang nodded, “I’m not looking for a work in progress, I’m looking for a partner.”

Then she wouldn’t likely find a partner amongst many of the higher ranked cultivators here. Qin Su wasn’t sure if she could have the same patience as Jiang Yanli either. Then again, Jiang Yanli didn’t put in work to make Jin Zixuan better. She just lived her life and one day he realized how amazing she was.

“He’s trying to be better for her,” Chifeng-Zun said, “Is that not romantic?”

“I suppose it is,” Qin Su agreed, “But not that many people are willing to change.”

“What happened to not speaking of these matters?” Luo Qingyang teased.

Chifeng-Zun just rolled his eyes, “Why not? Apparently, I was the only one taking the Crowd Hunt seriously.”

**Jin Zixuan started to follow the tracks.**

**“It is best if nobody gets hurt,” Jiang Yanli commented.**

**“If nobody gets hurt?” Jin Zixuan echoed, “Then what’s the fun in hunting if no one gets hurt? If you come to our personal hunting ground in Lanling, you could see rare prey. I’m available next month and I can take you there.”**

**Jiang Yanli bowed her head, “I appreciate your invitation, but...there is no need.”**

**“Why?” Jin Zixuan asked, “Is it because you dislike watching the hunt?” Jiang Yanli shook her head, “Then why did you come this time?”**

**Her expression became nervous, “I was...I...” She stammered.**

**Jin Zixuan looked down, “Do you dislike watching the hunt, or do you dislike being with me?”**

**Jiang Yanli breathed in sharply, “No. That’s not it. I-”**

**“Forget it,” Jin Zixuan dismissed, turning away.**

Jin Zixuan once again reminded himself that he was happily married to this woman.

“Thank you for your patience,” He whispered to his wife.

She just smiled.

He’d just been so nervous. He wanted desperately to make things right with her and start over. He wanted to go back to being her fiancé. He wanted her to love him like she had during the war, when she secretly made him soup. He thought he’d lost it forever, and in his hesitancy put words in her mouth and lashed out.

In his embarrassment, he hadn’t realized how many reasons he’d given Wei Wuxian to fight him.

“So this is how it went,” Jiang Wanyin commented, bringing him back to reality.

Reality, where this event was twisted beyond recognition to favor him and vilify Wei Wuxian. Reality, where no one told Jiang Wanyin what happened because the truth would have forced him to intervene in their relationship. An intervention A-Li didn’t want, so Wei Wuxian likewise kept silent. He felt another wave of guilt coming, then regret.

This viewing had brought them closer together. He thought he could consider Jiang Wanyin and Nie Huaisang friends.

Everyone else just had more dramatic secrets. He hoped they didn’t think he purposely kept all this from them to make himself look better. He just didn’t think about it.

**“Sorry,” Jiang Yanli whispered.**

**“You don’t need to apologize,” Jin Zixuan snapped, “You can interpret it any way you like. After all, I’m not the one who invited you. Forget it if you don’t want to come.”**

**Wei Wuxian made to rise, but Lan Wangji stopped him.**

**“Bastard,” Wei Wuxian muttered, then relaxed, “At least Shijie will now see his true character and won’t get involved with him anymore.”**

Madam Jin sat up straighter in her seat.

This was not going to make her look good. Given what she assumed would be revealed soon about the Jin Sect, it wasn’t a loss in reputation she could afford.

If Wei Wuxian intervened here, it wouldn't be unreasonable.

That he hadn't meant A-Xuan did worse.

**Jiang Yanli bowed, "Excuse me." She turned to leave.**

**"Wait!" Jin Zixuan called after her.**

**Wei Wuxian couldn't ignore that. He flew from his hiding place to put himself between Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli, swatting Jin Zixuan with Chenqing as he did so. He held his arms up protectively.**

**"Wei Wuxian, why do you keep appearing?" Jin Zixuan demanded.**

Because he'd sworn to take care of Jiang Yanli and Jiang Wanyin?

Because Jin Zixuan had a proven track record of making her cry?

There were many reasons for Wei Wuxian to interfere, and all of them were justified.

**"I should be asking that question," Wei Wuxian lowered Chenqing, "Why are you here again?"**

**"You started this with no reason!" Jin Zixuan replied, "Are you crazy?"**

**"Without a reason?" Wei Wuxian repeated, then pointed Chenqing at his face, "You are the reason! Why did you get mad and stop her after being rejected?"**

**"If I didn't stop her, should I have left her alone on this mountain?" Jin Zixuan asked, then drew his sword and lunged.**

**Wei Wuxian stretched both his arms out to protect Jiang Yanli.**

**Lan Wangji came just in time to deflect the blow.**

There was stunned silence around the room.

"Wei Wuxian wasn't going to fight you," Jiang Cheng finally said, "Fuck, he would have let you stab him before he fought you."

Just like he would have let Hanguang-Jun stab him. Just like he let Jiang Cheng himself stab him. Not that Wei Wuxian cared at all about Jin Zixuan. The idiot just knew how much the damned peacock meant to their sister. If it was for A-Jie, he'd do anything.

This wasn't like the soup incident. There, Jin Zixuan acknowledged he was wrong and didn't bring out his sword. Because there was no sword, Wei Wuxian was free to just punch him instead of using Chenqing.

Now, with a sword coming at him, he chose to take the damage rather than use Chenqing.

“How did Wei-xiong end up being the party in the wrong?” Nie Huaisang asked. He kept his voice light but there was anger in his eyes.

“You’ll see,” Jin Zixuan answered weakly.

“We’d better,” Jiang Cheng muttered.

**“Hanguang-Jun?” Jin Zixuan asked, confused.**

**Jin Zixun came running with the Jin disciples, “What happened?” He glared at Wei Wuxian, “Zixuan, did Wei Wuxian cause you trouble again? Leave it to me.”**

**Wei Wuxian turned away, grabbing his sister’s wrist to leave.**

**“Wait!” Jin Zixuan called out again.**

**Wei Wuxian paused, then turned around, “Why? Do you want another fight?”**

**Jin Zixun stepped between them, “Wei Wuxian, what do you want? Why do you keep troubling Zixuan?”**

**“Who are you?” Wei Wuxian wondered.**

**“How dare you not know who I am?” Jin Zixun thundered.**

**Wei Wuxian smirked, “Why should I know?”**

**“You-” Jin Zixun pointed.**

“I should have known Jin Zixun was involved,” Nie Huaisang drawled.

This was starting to snowball. He thought they’d present a united front against Jin Guangshan when the time came for the truth about Qiongqi Pass to be revealed. Er-ge took a lot of hits to his credibility with his disaster of a conversation with Wei Wuxian. Now Jin Zixuan was shown to have done plenty of wrong to Wei Wuxian as well.

Then there would be Da-ge’s comments at the meeting they’d had about Qiongqi Pass that wouldn’t make him look good either.

This was turning out just like he thought. No one was going to care about who was responsible for the massacred Wen civilians. They were just going to start pointing fingers and bringing up other past wrongs. It didn’t matter if those wrongs were equivalent.

He secretly hoped they were better than this, but deep down he knew they weren’t. He’d stick to analyzing what he saw. Maybe he could find some hint to what could truly take Jin Guangshan down.

**Before he could continue, Madam Jin arrived with Sect Leader Yao and more disciples.**

**“Mother,” Jin Zixuan asked, “Why did you come?”**

**“Don’t be self-centered. I didn’t come here for you,” Madam Jin walked past him and took Jiang Yanli’s hands, “A-Li, why do you look upset?”**

**“I appreciate your concern, but I’m fine,” Jiang Yanli assured her.**

**Madam Jin glared at her son, “Did my troublesome son bully you again?”**

**Jiang Yanli shook her head, “No.”**

**Madam Jin saw the truth, and glared at her son again, “A-Xuan, what is wrong with you? What did you promise me before leaving?”**

**“I-”**

**“No matter what your son promised you, Madam Jin,” Wei Wuxian interrupted, “From today on, he and Shijie will no longer have any association with each other.”**

**“Wei Wuxian!” Jin Zixun stormed forward, “My aunt is your senior. How can you talk this way? Do you think so highly of yourself?”**

**Wei Wuxian lifted his chin, “I don’t mean to disrespect Madam Jin, but your cousin has said harsh words to my Shijie yet again. If the YunmengJiang can endure it again, we no longer deserve the name of a gentry Sect.” He glared at Jin Zixun, “So how can you say that I’m too proud?”**

**Wen Qing sighed.**

**It didn’t matter if he had all the right words or reasons, there was too much underhandedness going on. Madam Jin would discredit Wei Wuxian simply because she wanted her son to marry Jiang Yanli. Jin Zixun was either out to deliberately provoke him, or he really believed the bullshit that came out of his mouth.**

**As long as it was Wei Wuxian speaking, no one would listen.**

**“Calm down,” Wen Qing whispered to Jiang Wanyin.**

**Whoever resorted to violence first would look worse. Even if the violence was justified.**

**“You are too proud to remember who you are,” Jin Zixun replied, “Today is a big day for the crowd hunt. You are the center! Thirty percent of the prey has been caught by you. Aren’t you proud of yourself?”**

**“Thirty percent?” Lan Wangji asked.**

**“Hanguang-Jun, you may not know yet,” A disciple informed him, “We were just hunting. After a while, we were surprised to see that there was no prey in the hunting ground.”**

**“Yes,” Another agreed, “After asking Lianfeng-Zun, who was watching from the stands, we were told that within thirty minutes, a flute sound came down the mountain, almost**

**all the prey walked into the nets set by the Jiang Sect one by one to sacrifice themselves.”**

**“Wei Wuxian, you are so selfish,” Jin Zixun insulted, “You never think about others. Aren’t you too proud?”**

“Would it have been a problem if anyone else caught thirty percent of the prey?” Su She asked.

By anybody else, he of course meant the elites.

Would anyone have dared complain if Zewu-Jun or Hanguang-Jun decided to blow away any and all competition? How about Chifeng-Zun? Wasn’t the point of a competition to dominate?

Life wasn’t fair.

It especially wasn’t fair to those who got power through what others considered underhanded means. If Su She took thirty percent of the prey here, he’d also have been accused of breaking some sort of rule. If he did anything, people would always look at him and credit his accomplishments to the Lan Sect.

Pride was for those born high. If anyone below them dared to be proud, it was selfish.

Su She found it funny that both the men he hated found Wei Wuxian selfish.

**Wei Wuxian laughed, walking away, “You people have said that in the hunt, capability talks. Why do you betray your own words?”**

**“What you showed is just a dirty trick,” Jin Zixun got in his face again, “Not your own capability. You just play the flute. How can it be called capability?”**

**“I didn’t pull any dirty tricks,” Wei Wuxian replied, “Why can’t it be my own capability?” He scoffed and held up Chenqing, “Or can you play the flute? Let’s see if anything will follow your sound.”**

**“You broke the rules,” Jin Zixun switched tracks, “It isn’t any better than playing dirty tricks!”**

**Wei Wuxian drew Chenqing back, “Fine. If I don’t know what capability is, then please show me yours. Astonish me, please.”**

“Ah, the surest sign of a sore loser,” MianMian shook her head, “Accusing the winner of cheating.”

“He did cheat!” Jin Zixun insisted.

“There’s nothing specifically banning demonic cultivation,” Nie Huaisang pointed out.

“It shouldn’t have to be specifically banned to be wrong!”



“And yet, I’m pretty sure I saw the Jin Sect using lure talismans,” Nie Huaisang tapped his hand to his chin, “So demonic cultivation is wrong, but the products of demonic cultivation are all good?”

“The lure flags can be used by anyone,” Jin Zixun argued.

“So can demonic cultivation,” MianMian countered, “Wei Wuxian doesn’t even have a golden core.” It was worth reminding these idiots that every time they condemned Wei Wuxian for demonic cultivation, they were condemning him for something he never chose.

“Good point, MianMian,” Nie Huaisang nodded, “But it would take a lot of hard work and sacrifice to ever come close to Wei-xiong’s level.”

Jiang Wanyin scoffed, “Whether he cultivates with a sword or resentment wouldn’t have changed the result here.”

**“You...” Jin Zixun trailed off, then laughed and crossed his arms, “It’s understandable that you don’t know you are wrong. It’s not the first time that you have broken the rules. The last time was at the banquet, and this time, in the night hunt. You never carry your sword. At such a solemn occasion, you know nothing of manners. Where do you place us, those who participate with you?”**

**Wei Wuxian ignored him, “Lan Zhan, I forgot to thank you for shielding me just now. Thanks.”**

Nie Mingjue snorted.

A personal attack never would have gotten to Wei Wuxian. He’d have to care about his person for that to work.

“Switching attacks just shows how much of a failure the original was,” Jin Guangyao commented.

Exactly. Jin Zixun knew he couldn’t hold a candle to Wei Wuxian’s capability. Honestly, Nie Mingjue couldn’t think of a single feat the arrogant man accomplished. He wasn’t with Jin Zixuan at the Cloud Recesses lectures. He wasn’t brought to Indoctrination. While he was chosen for the war meetings, Nie Mingjue couldn’t even remember seeing him fight a battle.

He just showed up at the end.

“To add insult to injury, one must cause injury first,” Xichen agreed.

**Jin Zixuan moved to be in his line of sight, “The YunmengJiang has no better manners than this. They even produced a demonic cultivator.”**

**“Zixun!” Madam Jin scolded.**

**“Family discipline? Demonic cultivation?” Wei Wuxian truly began to get angry.**

“What did he ever do to you?” Jin Zixuan asked, “You attack his cultivation, his person, and now his Sect? His family?”

All Wei Wuxian had done was protect his sister. That’s why he spoke up at the banquet. That’s why he was even in this current situation.

He only captured thirty percent of the prey. He’d done so effortlessly. What if he’d really tried? He controlled all those puppets in the Nightless City. Controlling puppets was undoubtedly harder than controlling whatever demonic beasts the Jin Sect could acquire.

Wei Wuxian managed a huge feat of demonic cultivation and didn’t look close to losing control.

Wasn’t that worth some attention? Not that Jin Zixuan hoped demonic cultivation would become popular, but the lure flags were increasingly being used. Undoubtedly Wei Wuxian’s study of resentment would create more tools and methods that could be used to subdue demonic entities. Were they going to ignore those because it made competitions less fun?

Cultivation wasn’t meant to be used to win competitions. They cultivated to protect the common people.

When had it all gotten so twisted up?

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji warned.**

**Wei Wuxian laughed, “Don’t you want to know why I refuse to carry my sword?” He turned away, “It doesn’t matter even if I tell you. I don’t need to carry my sword. I, Wei Wuxian, will beat all of you by only using my dirty, evil tricks you speak of and leave all of you far behind.”**

**“Wei Wuxian,” Jin Zixun darted in again, Madam Jin failing to hold him back, “You are no more than the son of a servant. Don’t be insane!”**

**Wei Wuxian breathed heavily, his hand trembling as he fought the urge to use Chenqing.**

**Lan Wangji came to his side, grabbing his arm, “Wei Ying, concentrate.” He insisted, “Wei Ying, concentrate.”**

**Jiang Yanli ran to his side and grabbed his other arm, “A-Xian,” She pleaded, “A-Xian.”**

**Gaining control of himself, Wei Wuxian breathed faster, the tension leaving his body.**

“He was provoked,” Jiang Cheng growled, daring anyone to argue that Wei Wuxian was out of control.

Wei Wuxian only lost control when someone forced him to.

Jin Zixun tried to attack Wei Wuxian's cultivation. Of course that didn't work, because Wei Wuxian forged his abilities in literal hell. He knew there could be no other like him. Then Jin Zixun went for his sense of shame. It was almost laughable, because Wei Wuxian was as shameless as people came. What did he care for manners?

"Jin Zixun just used what worked before," Nie Huaisang reminded him.

It had. Reminding Wei Wuxian of how his actions impacted the Jiang Sect kept him quiet about the slaughter of innocents in Nightless City.

"But even provoked, he didn't hurt Jiang Yanli or Hanguang-Jun," Wen Qing noted.

Even if he was pushed from the edge, someone could drag him back.

**"Get behind me," Jiang Yanli ordered.**

**"Shijie," Wei Wuxian's expression grew sad.**

**Jiang Yanli faced Jin Zixun.**

**"A-Li, don't be angry," Madam Jin tried to soothe, "Leave them to deal with their business."**

**Jiang Yanli bowed in acknowledgment, then stepped closer to Jin Zixun, "Jin-gongzi. You've just said that A-Xian took thirty percent of the prey. You said he broke the rules and was too proud. I...I don't know much about this. It may cause some trouble for you. I apologize to you all for him." She bowed.**

**"Shijie!" Wei Wuxian protested, but was stopped by Lan Wangji.**

**Jin Zixun smirked at him.**

**Jiang Yanli just shook her head. Wei Wuxian shrunk back, tears coming to his eyes.**

This was not how this confrontation was retold.

Those who did not witness this were told of a confrontation between Jin Zixun and Wei Wuxian. They were told Jin Zixun heroically stood up to the Yiling Patriarch for his unsportsmanlike conduct during the Crowd Hunt. They were told that Jin Zixun was threatened, but came out unharmed. They were told that Wei Wuxian was unreasonable.

They were lied to.

Jin Zixun provoked Wei Wuxian. It was uncertain if he did so under orders, but what rivalry did Jin Zixun have with Wei Wuxian? There was no reason for such blatant antagonism.

Wei Wuxian was almost baited into attacking.

But his sister stopped him.

Now, Jiang Yanli was defending him.

**Jin Zixun laughed, “Jiang-guniang is polite and decent and can tell right from wrong.” He moved past her, “What your shidi has done is indeed wrong and has caused trouble. But there’s no need to apologize for you and Jiang-zongzhu’s sake. After all, the LanlingJin and the YunmengJiang are like family.”**

**Jiang Yanli turned to face him, “However, although I have never participated, I do understand that since the ancient times until today, there isn’t a rule that forbids one participant from catching too much prey. You just said that A-Xian broke the rules. I want to ask which rule A-Xian has broken.”**

“There’s a reason there are three thousand rules,” Lan Qiren said.

They put as much as they could in writing purely for this situation. Common sense was not as common as many people believed. There needed to be strict guidelines for there to be order.

If they’d just had time, the Lan Sect could have made rules for this too. They were just too slow to keep up. They were still inspecting the lure talismans, seeing what their range was based on power provided and what type of entities they attracted most. As much as he distrusted Wei Wuxian, he could see the worth of his inventions.

To choose one’s battlefield was always an advantage. It would reduce property damage and civilian casualties if they could lure monsters away.

Wei Wuxian was revolutionizing night hunting. It might take a thousand more rules, but they would catch up within the decade.

Too late to help Wei Wuxian, but maybe the next person unfortunate enough to need demonic cultivation could fare better.

**“Jiang-guniang, this is not right!” Sect Leader Yao interjected, “Although some rules haven’t been written out, we all learn them in our hearts very clearly. Besides, we’ve been obeying the rules well.”**

**“That’s right! There is not much prey in the hunting ground!” A Jin disciple agreed, “No more than five hundred, right? How many participants are there? More than five thousand! It’s already hard! What’s more, he has taken so much for himself! Don’t you agree?”**

**“It’s not his fault that you can’t hunt the prey,” Jiang Yanli stated, “Capability talks in the hunt. Although A-Xian took a different method, he studied it with effort. You can’t make the judgment that he practiced dirty tricks just because you can’t hunt enough prey.”**

**Jiang Yanli got in his face, “Besides, let’s focus on the hunt, not our family education. A-Xian is a disciple of the YunmengJiang, who grew up with me and my brother. We’re like real siblings. You referred to him as the son of a servant, which is unacceptable to me. Hence...”**

**She paused, “I hope you, Jin-gongzi, can apologize to Wei Wuxian from the YunmengJiang.”**

**Wei Wuxian actually started crying at that.**

In all the retellings, no one mentioned Wei Wuxian’s tears.

Huaisang applauded Jiang Yanli’s speech, as did many others.

Jin Guangyao focused on Wei Wuxian. It was strange to see the effects of his plan up close. He planned for this. He fueled the rumors that led to everyone turning against Wei Wuxian. He made it so it didn’t matter what Wei Wuxian said or did. Wei Wuxian would always go down as the villain.

He even swayed Jiang Wanyin’s opinion, but it looked like he could never sway Jiang Yanli.

That kind of belief was powerful. He could see why it brought Wei Wuxian to tears.

To be worthy of that kind of belief...it was something to aspire to.

**“A-Li,” Madam Jin interjected, “Don’t take it seriously. Relax.”**

**“Madam Jin,” Jiang Yanli spared her a glance, “A-Xian is my younger brother. If he is humiliated,” She shook her head, “That is not trivial to me.” She returned her glare to Jin Zixun.**

**“Zixun, didn’t you hear her?” Madam Jin demanded.**

**“Aunt!” Jin Zixun protested.**

**That’s when Lan Xichen and Jin Guangyao arrived.**

**“Wangji, why are you here too?” Lan Xichen asked.**

**“My friends, why are you all gathered here?” Jin Guangyao wondered, striding towards the group.**

**“What happened?” Madam Jin thundered, “You’re smiling? How can you still smile? Look at the crowd hunt held by you! Useless!”**

**Jin Guangyao looked around, “Madam, what happened?”**

**“What happened?” Madam Jin repeated incredulously, “Can’t you figure it out yourself? Aren’t you good at that?”**

So it wasn’t just Jin Zixun who looked for any opportunity to attack.

Just who was involved in the Jin Sect’s power grabs?

**“About thirty percent of the prey has been caught,” Jin Zixun informed him. Lan Xichen turned to Wei Wuxian, who Lan Wangji once again stood shoulder to shoulder**

with, **“How much is left for the rest of the participants?”**

**Lan Xichen stepped forward, “Lianfeng-Zun has prepared to expand the hunting region. Please calm down.”**

**Jin Zixun scoffed, “This hunt is just a farce! Forget it! I withdraw!”**

“Ah, the second sign of a sore loser,” Luo Qingyang nudged her.

Qin Su frowned, “Giving up after you already lost?”

Chifeng-Zun coughed back a laugh.

It was strange to think they were so close to Qiongqi Pass. With all the doubt surrounding the truth of the Jin Sect’s claims, she still thought there would be something. But Wei Wuxian’s anger towards Jin Zixun had passed. The man had been reduced to tears from the shame of his sister lowering herself in his defense.

Even if her words later completely nullified that apology.

Would things have been different had Jiang Yanli been able to attend the banquet? If she and Hanguang-Jun together could have soothed his anger?

**Jin Guangyao grabbed his arm, “Zixun. I made the preparations. It will take no more than half an hour.”**

**“Jin-gongzi,” Sect Leader Yao agreed, “There’s no need to withdraw.”**

**“There are no rules left in this hunt anyways,” Jin Zixun huffed, “Why should I wait? I’ll leave first.” Then he stormed off.**

“Now who’s cheating?” Nie Huaisang asked mockingly.

Lan Wangji kept his expression stony. Jin Guangshan was letting Jin Zixun take the fall for all this. It would be hard to prove Jin Guangshan was directly responsible for anything. It would come down to Lianfeng-Zun’s word against the Sect Leader, and neither were going to be trusted.

He envied Jiang Yanli for finding the right words to defend Wei Ying here.

He wished he’d ever been able to find the right words.

He distracted himself with thoughts of a better future. Regardless of how Jin Guangshan would fall, he trusted Nie Huaisang and Lianfeng-Zun to see that it would come about. His older brother may not like how they got there, but Lan Wangji didn’t care. Lan Wangji would gladly kill the man himself if it wouldn’t create more problems.

What was he going to say to Wei Ying when he saw him again?

Would he even be able to speak to him before either of his siblings did? Would that be proper? Jiang Wanyin was going to confront Wei Ying about his golden core, Jiang Yanli about how they didn't need him to sacrifice himself constantly for their sake.

Would Wei Ying be in the right mindset to process his confession and respond to it properly?

He needed the right words.

**Jiang Yanli touched Wei Wuxian's arm, and they started off with the other half of the Jin contingent. Wei Wuxian separated himself immediately.**

**"Madam Jin, I caused some trouble for you this time," Jiang Yanli said.**

**"A-Li, nothing about you is a problem for me," Madam Jin assured her, "My son made you upset. If you are unhappy, I can give him a beating for you."**

**"No need," Jiang Yanli quickly denied, drawing to a stop, "Madam Jin, I'll be on my way then."**

**"Wait," Madam Jin grabbed her arm, "Come back to the stands with me. Let Zixuan accompany you. Zixuan-"**

**"There's no need for that," Jiang Yanli interrupted, "I...A-Xian will accompany me."**

**"A-Li," Madam Jin smiled, "You and Wei Wuxian, a young man and a young woman...it's not proper for you two to stay alone together often."**

"Then it wasn't proper for us to be alone either, Mother," Jin Zixuan put a hand to his forehead.

He'd noticed his family's hypocrisy before, but he hadn't realized just how blatant it was.

There was his father, blatantly lying about how close he was to Jiang Fengmian so that he could force a betrothal between him and A-Li. Whether that was to provoke Wei Wuxian or get him closer to under his control was beyond him. Then there was Guangyao, using the investigation to fuel rumors so that he could get his hands on the very weapon he was to investigate.

His cousin would make a big deal of one thing then blatantly do it in front of everyone. It was hypocrisy at its finest. Now his mother was implying that the sibling love between A-Li and Wei Wuxian was something twisted, instead of something she could never understand.

Something she had deliberately deprived him of.

**"A-Xian is my younger brother," Jiang Yanli smiled.**

**Madam Jin sighed, "A-Li, your mother was a close friend of mine. Forgive me for saying too much, but you two are no longer children. If you often stay alone together, people may make idle talks."**

**Jiang Yanli looked at Wei Wuxian, whose eyes grew wet again. She offered him a smile, obviously not listening to Madam Jin.**

**“He has a strong wicked energy,” Madam Jin warned, “He may do something evil. Take my advice and stay away from him.”**

**Wei Wuxian gripped Chenqing tighter.**

**“Madam Jin, A-Xian is my brother,” Jiang Yanli repeated, “I’ll never leave him.”**

**This made Wei Wuxian smile.**

Lan Xichen smiled. Not even his words could tear a rift between Jiang Yanli and her brothers.

It was soothing to see that trust wasn’t misplaced or doubted. Not once did she demand an answer from Wei Wuxian. She didn’t know the whole story, only that her brother was suffering and he couldn’t take more attacks.

He should have done the same for Wangji. He didn’t need to know the specifics. He should have trusted his brother to do the right thing and stood up to him when their elders questioned it.

Lan Xichen would keep this in mind going forward. Especially as he considered what to tell who about their parents.

**“A-Li,” Madam Jin switched topics, “Are you still angry at my son? If you are angry at him, I will teach him a lesson indeed!”**

**“There’s no need for that,” Jiang Yanli denied again. She glanced at Jin Zixuan, then sighed, “Madam Jin, please don’t force him.”**

**“I didn’t,” Madam Jin denied.**

**“Madam Jin,” Wei Wuxian interrupted, taking Jiang Yanli’s arm, “I don’t want to trouble Jin-gongzi anymore. Let’s part ways here. Farewell, Madam Jin.”**

**“A-Li,” Madam Jin called after them, but they didn’t stop, “Zixuan, hurry up!”**

**Jin Zixuan hesitated, his arms crossed, before he raised his voice, “Jiang-guniang! Wait, Jiang-guniang!”**

**Jiang Yanli stopped.**

**“You misunderstood me!” Jin Zixuan continued, “It’s not what you think, Jiang-guniang.” Wei Wuxian turned to look at her, and saw she was listening, “It’s not what you think. I wasn’t forced by my mother. I wasn’t forced at all!”**

**Lan Xichen, Lan Wangji, and Jin Guangyao’s group caught up.**



**“It’s me!” Jin Zixuan confessed, “It’s me who wanted to invite you. I...”**

**Jiang Yanli turned around, her expression hopeful.**

**Jin Zixuan couldn’t look at her, overwhelmed by embarrassment. He glanced at Lan Xichen, at all the people around them, then ran off.**

If there was a competition for better confession, Jin Zixuan lost.

But theirs didn’t have to be dramatic. Jin Zixuan had time if he messed this up. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin could try their best to keep them separated, but as long as Jiang Yanli was willing to give him a chance, he would have a chance.

Hanguang-Jun and Jiang Wanyin didn’t have those chances.

Every time they encountered the one they loved could have been the last.

So of course there was more willingness to put aside embarrassment. There was no time for shame when Wen Qing could have died returning to Qishan, or been killed by the allied Sects of the Sunshot Campaign for just being a Wen. There was no room for hesitation when the cultivation world was coming for Wei Wuxian, and Hanguang-Jun was confined.

It was still a decent confession, but they had it easy.

**“Zixuan, why did you run away?” Madam Jin yelled after him. Then she took Jiang Yanli’s hands, “A-Li, let’s go. Come back with me to Koi Tower. Later, at the banquet, I’ll ask him to apologize again.”**

**Jiang Yanli just nodded.**

**“Let’s go,” Madam Jin repeated.**

**“Shijie,” Wei Wuxian protested.**

**Jiang Yanli turned back to him and smiled, “It’s fine, A-Xian.”**

**Wei Wuxian bit back another protest, “Fine.” He bowed, “Then, Madam Jin, please take care of my Shijie.”**

**Madam Jin just stormed off, leaving Wei Wuxian alone.**

Jiang Yanli should have stayed.

She had literally just promised to never leave him. Then A-Xuan confessed and she’d been so overwhelmed that she just let Madam Jin take her away. She’d smiled and told him it was fine, not realizing that it was only fine for her.

It was all that she ever wanted for herself. Why did it have to cost her something else?

A-Xian finally believed she was there for him, and she left him alone.

No wonder this was the last time she saw him until her visit to Yiling.

**Lan Xichen turned to Lan Wangji.**

**Then Jiang Cheng arrived, “Wei Wuxian.”**

**“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian returned, “You just missed an interesting drama.”**

**“What is it?” Jiang Cheng demanded.**

**Wei Wuxian glanced in the direction of Jiang Yanli, but then just shook his head, “Forget it.” He patted his arm, “I’ll leave now.”**

**Jiang Cheng grabbed his arm before he could leave, “Wei Wuxian. Where are you going? There is the banquet after the hunt. Come with me.”**

**Wei Wuxian gently removed his hand from his arm, “I want to walk around Lanling. I might not be able to accompany you.” Then he shifted his gaze, “Lan Zhan, farewell!”**

**Lan Wangji said nothing and Wei Wuxian left.**

It had only been a coincidence that Wen Qing ran into him. Coincidence or fate.

If Jiang Wanyin had convinced him to explain, they would have missed each other on the road. If he had convinced his brother to go straight to the banquet, they never would have had the chance to speak beforehand.

Was it better that they met on the streets of Lanling? Or would it have been better for her to make her accusations to Jin Zixun when she crashed the banquet? Koi Tower let in plenty of beautiful women without question. She may have been exhausted, but she was determined to find A-Ning.

If she’d gone to the banquet, would Jiang Wanyin have come with them to Qiongqi Pass?

“Are you prepared?” Jiang Wanyin whispered to her.

Wen Qing paused. She didn’t think she could ever be prepared. So she asked in return, “Are you?”

“I may not be who you want beside you,” He murmured, “But I am here for you.”

It was a small comfort. Considering she hadn’t been expecting any, she would take it.

**“What a mess,” Jin Guangyao muttered.**

**“It’s not your fault,” Lan Xichen assured him.**

He’d been wrong about that.

So very, very wrong.

Not that it was entirely his fault alone, but he wasn't faultless.

**Jiang Cheng went up to him, “Lan-zongzhu, I came here after seeing sword glares. May I ask what happened?”**

**Lan Xichen just smiled, “You should ask your sister in person at the banquet.”**

**“Yes,” Jin Guangyao agreed, “It’s not proper for us outsiders to make comments. Jiang-zongzhu, we’ll go first.”**

**Everyone else walked off, but Jin Guangyao lingered in front of Jiang Cheng, “Jiang-zongzhu, that Wei Wuxian is really somebody.”**

Jiang Yanli had been unshakeable in her belief in Wei Wuxian.

Jiang Wanyin?

It wasn't that he didn't believe in Wei Wuxian. It was that he had so much more at stake if he continued to support Wei Wuxian publicly. With the Jin Sect steadily turning everyone against Wei Wuxian, what could one young Sect Leader do to stop it? Especially when everyone seemed determined to keep him uninformed of important events.

No one told him of the insults Madam Jin and Jin Zixun gave Wei Wuxian, so the wedding went forward.

No one told him Wei Wuxian was constantly provoked, so he was forced to abandon him.

Every remark, every confrontation, they held significance, but it still seemed unlikely Wei Wuxian snapped at Qiongqi Pass.

Theorizing at this point was useless. They were about to see what happened for themselves.

## Chapter End Notes

I really want to start working on the TGCF and SVSSS fics, so if these last few chapters seem rushed, they kinda are. But these are also the chapters I've been waiting to write since I started this whole thing so...be kind in the comments.

I hope you enjoyed it! It would be great to break 5,000 kudos but I'm pretty sure that'll have to wait until the next chapter!

Also, if you didn't notice, Chapter 1 is up for the SVSSS watching the series fic!

# The Moment of Truth

## Chapter Summary

Why is it so hard to do the right thing?

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jin Guangyao had never actually gone to Qiongqi Pass.

It was a strategic move on his part. If he never went there, then he could claim plausible deniability about what was happening if anyone found out. He also knew better than to leave Lanling for any significant amount of time. Not when his position in Koi Tower was so precarious. One couldn't gain influence if they weren't there to influence.

It was bad. He read the reports. He kept a list of casualties at one point. He'd needed to, with the experiments they were running.

His father was impatient. He couldn't wait for them to force Wei Wuxian to forfeit the Amulet or confess how he used resentful energy. Jin Guangyao hadn't cared about the cost of his impatience, nor the cruelty done for the sake of power. He'd done nothing to stop it and worked hard to cover it up.

Now, they would see the truth.

Jin Guangyao was still seated by Er-ge's side. It was one thing to confess his actions. It was another to see the bodies of those he let be massacred. If Er-ge decided he was worthless...

He took a deep breath. No, they'd gone over this. It didn't matter how terrible he was. Er-ge would always love the part of him that wasn't so bad. It wasn't so simple.

If he got what was coming to him, he could find some peace in that.

**As he walked back to the banquet, Jiang Cheng could hear Sect Leader Yao talk, "The Jiang Sect really made a hit. Nearly all the ghosts were summoned into nets set by them. Many cultivators will then become their disciples."**

**"Yes," The disciples accompanying him agreed.**

**"What can we do?" Another wondered, "We don't have Wei Wuxian."**

**"Having Wei Wuxian is not a benefit," Sect Leader Yao disagreed, "I don't want someone who will cause me trouble every day."**

What trouble? What every day?

Wei Wuxian had done nothing in the time between the end of the Sunshot Campaign and the Crowd Hunt. Literally nothing. He drank and spent time with his siblings. He didn't train. He didn't come up with any more inventions based on demonic cultivation.

He'd done nothing to deserve this slander.

**“Did you hear that Wei Wuxian’s treasure, the Stygian Tiger Amulet, is made of Yin Iron?” The disciple gossiped.**

**“Really?” Sect Leader Yao asked.**

**“It’s the lost one,” The disciple insisted, “I overheard it from Lianfeng-Zun. Although it’s not certain yet, think about it. If it’s not made from Yin Iron, how could it be such a coincidence? When the shard was lost, Wei Wuxian then acquired the Amulet. I guess Wei Wuxian must have taken it.”**

**Sect Leader Yao nodded, “You may be right. Wei Wuxian is too proud of himself! Anyway, all night hunts with the Jiangs will not have me.”**

**“The Jiang Sect?” The disciple scoffed, “It has nothing to do with them. To be frank, it’s all Wei Wuxian. In the Sunshot Campaign, they all depended on Wei Wuxian alone. That’s why the YunmengJiang has its reputation.”**

**“Forget it,” Sect Leader Yao dismissed, “Let’s go!”**

**Jiang Cheng breathed deeply to contain his anger.**

“I shouldn’t have listened to them,” Jiang Cheng growled.

Nie Huaisang internally agreed, “There was nothing you could have done.”

His friend glanced at him, “Could you?”

Nie Huaisang grimaced, “Ah, could have done or would have done?”

He could have done a great many things before this. He could have tried to start a serious discussion with his brother. He could have investigated the Jin Sect earlier or started spreading rumors of his own to counter those about Wei Wuxian. He could have run off to the Burial Mounds himself and offered aid.

“I’m not actually that benevolent, Jiang-xiong,” He whispered, “We both have to protect our Sects.”

He knew Da-ge wouldn’t have continued the persecution of innocents, but they couldn’t be the Sect that supported a demonic cultivator. They couldn’t have anyone testing them for the influence of resentful energy and finding out their secret. If the Jiang Sect could barely keep face while supporting Wei Wuxian, he didn’t want to think what would happen to the Nie Sect.

Even while planning this, a part of him had hesitated. He could have easily let his friend die.

**Wei Wuxian drank as he wandered down the streets of Lanling.**

**“Stay away, you dirty homeless person!”**

**Wei Wuxian turned around, watching as Wen Qing wiped dirt from her hands. The Jin disciples that pushed her down didn’t even spare her a second glance. She went to fix her hood and caught Wei Wuxian staring. She froze.**

**Wei Wuxian approached her.**

“You came to Lanling?” Jin Zixuan was surprised.

He shouldn’t be. Now that he knew Wei Wuxian couldn’t fly on a sword, it was highly unlikely he ran into Wen Qing before the banquet anywhere but Lanling. Still, he was surprised.

“Jin Zixun took my people away,” Wen Qing replied, “Where else would I have found him?”

She had a point.

“You didn’t...?” Go there for Jiang Wanyin? Or Wei Wuxian?

Wen Qing sighed, “I didn’t have much of a plan. I just...wanted my brother.”

Through whatever means came her way. He spared a thought for if she had just interrupted the banquet herself. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin would have ensured she wasn’t immediately arrested. Granted, it was more likely to escalate into a fight, as Wen Qing was involved with the Yin Iron. He wasn’t sure if Hanguang-Jun hid her involvement from Zewu-Jun, thus Guangyao.

It was desperation that drove her to Lanling, to the home of the Sect that slaughtered her people.

**The memory jumped to Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji on the steps to Koi Tower.**

**“Wangji, I feel that you are worried about something,” Lan Xichen observed, “What is it?”**

**Lan Wangji slowed to a stop, then turned to face him, “Xiongzhang, I...I want to bring a man to Cloud Recesses.”**

**“Bring a man to Cloud Recesses?” Lan Xichen echoed.**

**“Bring him back and hide him there,” Lan Wangji confessed.**

**“Hide him?” Lan Xichen repeated, slowly turning away, “He may be unwilling to go, right?”**

**Lan Wangji just looked down.**

Jiang Yanli looked at the thinly concealed desperation on his face. So much desperation all around, but where A-Xian and Wen Qing's led to rash action, Hanguang-Jun's led to inaction.

Zewu-Jun didn't give permission, nor did he forbid it. He simply pointed out that A-Xian wouldn't want to go. Not knowing what he did then. Maybe, if Hanguang-Jun had managed to further clarify their relationship beyond soulmates, but even then, there would have been a fight between them.

A-Xian wasn't one to be hidden. If Hanguang-Jun tried anything like that, A-Xian would have taken it as confirmation of his fears that going to Cloud Recesses was imprisonment.

"Hanguang-Jun never got to speak with him," Her husband said, "Not before Qiongqi Pass."

"No one did," Nie Huaisang grimaced.

From what she heard, he came in and confronted Jin Zixun immediately. Then he threatened him publicly and left as soon as that threat got him the answer he wanted.

Like a flash of lightning. Sudden and intense, leaving rolls of thunder in its absence.

**The banquet was well underway when Jin Zixun approached Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji.**

**"Lan-zongzhu, Hanguang-Jun. Let's toast to you two," Jin Zixun raised his pitcher.**

**"Zixun," Jin Guangyao warned, "Zewu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun are from Cloud Recesses. Their three thousand disciplines are carved into the wall. Instead of drinking liquor, you might as well--"**

**"Eh?" Jin Zixun interrupted, "The Jin Sect and the Lan Sect are close friends. If you don't drink, that means you look down on me."**

**"What a frank and forthright spirit!" Someone cheered, "It is what the gentry should be made of."**

**The other minor Sect leaders agreed.**

Qin Su could feel the chagrin spread amongst her father's friends.

"Frank and forthright?" Luo Qingyang scoffed, "More like bullies."

"How could they see anything wrong when they do the same all the time?" Qin Su noted.

She was aware of the tension, of the edge they were approaching. She was half-certain a fight would break out. It scared her, because any blood spilt could be cause for a blood feud later. However, as Chifeng-Zun nodded in agreement she felt some of her fear wane. Some fights were unavoidable, she supposed.

Though this wasn't a fight. Just like people were quick to latch onto Zewu-Jun's mistake in Yunmeng, they had been just as eager to see him break rules at this banquet.

They never considered the obvious. If Jin Zixun treated his betters like this, then how did he treat those who he considered lesser? They had their answer now since they'd seen him kill women and children in Nightless City. The lesson was reinforced by his treatment of Wei Wuxian during the Crowd Hunt.

Jin Zixun was a terrible person. Anyone could have cursed him.

**Jin Zixun chuckled, "Let's save the words. Lan-zongzhu, we are not strangers. Don't treat me the way you do to strangers. One simple question. Will you drink or not?"**

**Lan Xichen glanced at his brother.**

**"They still need to ride their swords to go back," Jin Guangyao tried to excuse them, "Drinking will affect that."**

**Jin Zixun laughed, "Drinking two cups won't hurt them. Even if I drank eight jars, I could still ride my sword." He poured wine into the cup.**

**Sect Leader Yao laughed.**

**Nie Mingjue glared as Lan Xichen accepted the cup. Jin Zixuan watched curiously.**

**Lan Xichen drank.**

Nie Mingjue should have drank for him.

He'd just never tried to fight Xichen's battles for him. Or rather, he assumed if it was anyone's place to defend Xichen here, it was Jin Guangyao's.

Yes, alcohol didn't even affect him. Yes, he drank with Wei Wuxian, but that was in private. Who was Wei Wuxian going to tell? Who would ever believe him if he said anything? Besides, he had met Wei Wuxian where he was and that was in a wine house.

It was different to force a drink on him in public.

**"The Jin Sect wants us all to sink to their level," He growled.**

**"It was just a drink," Jin Guangshan dismissed.**

**"It's their way of life," Huaisang countered, "Expecting someone to abandon their traditions to follow yours...isn't that what Indoctrination was for?"**

**"Good," Jin Zixun praised, taking the cup back, "Hanguang-Jun. It's your turn."**

**Lan Xichen shook his head at his behavior.**

**Lan Wangji didn't even turn to look at him.**



**“Please,” Jin Zixun extended the cup.**

**Wei Wuxian hurried through the hall and snatched the cup, “I’ll drink for him. Is that okay?”**

**Lan Wangji did look at Wei Wuxian, who downed the cup easily.**

There was no mistaking the longing in Hanguang-Jun’s expression.

Not that any of the Lan Sect disciples blamed him. If someone came and saved them from an uncomfortable social situation caused by others not understanding the Lan Sect rules, they’d be incredibly grateful as well. Maybe not to the point where they’d look like that, but still grateful.

It was another point in Wei Wuxian’s favor. It would be nice to have someone in the Lan Sect they could throw at rude guests and not have to worry about breaking rules.

This sort of situation was all too common. They didn’t know how to respond to such blatant discourtesy. Remaining silent didn’t stop them. Rejecting the offer only made them double. There were many people in the world who couldn’t be reasoned with, and with the rules forbidding yelling and interrupting, many Lan disciples often felt bullied.

They could break the rules, but then it did feel like sinking to their level. It felt like giving up a part of themselves.

Yes, the rules weren’t always right, but it was their choice when to break them. Not others’.

**“Wei-gongzi,” Lan Xichen warned as Wei Wuxian proved the cup was empty.**

**“When did you get here?” Jin Zixun asked suspiciously.**

**“Just now,” Wei Wuxian answered.**

**“Wei-gongzi,” Jin Guangyao moved himself between the two, “Why did you come so late? Here. Sit down, please.”**

**“Don’t bother,” Wei Wuxian said, “I have something urgent to ask Jin-gongzi.” He gestured to the side, “Can I have a moment with you?”**

**“You can talk to me when the banquet is over,” Jin Zixun dismissed.**

**“How long will it take?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**Jin Zixun scoffed, “Six to eight hours.” He looked away, “Or eight to ten hours, maybe.” He nudged Jin Guangyao back, “Or maybe it will end tomorrow.”**

**“I’m afraid I can’t wait that long,” Wei Wuxian said.**

**“It’s not up to you,” Jin Zixun replied.**

“You were so eager to talk to him earlier,” Jiang Cheng growled, “Couldn’t stop running your mouth.”

He’d been annoyed when Wei Wuxian showed up and immediately came to Hanguang-Jun’s aide. He had half hoped his brother wouldn’t show at all. He knew Wei Wuxian would have protested him sharing the results of the hunt with everyone. His presence during his all but apology would have only aggravated others.

Then he started talking, and was obviously angry in the dangerous way Jiang Cheng had only seen when he confronted Wen Chao and Wen Zhuliu.

He’d gone into crisis mode from there. He didn’t want Wei Wuxian to kill anyone. Then he heard Wen Ning and couldn’t help but think of Wen Qing and he just...

Ended up doing nothing. He was torn. Wei Wuxian wasn’t going to stop and give him an explanation.

“Ah, can’t you tell? He only does what he wants,” Luo Qingyang snarked, “What does he care about others?”

Nie Huaisang snorted.

**“Wei Wuxian,” Jiang Cheng warned.**

**“Wei-gongzi, what do you need from Zixun?” Jin Guangyao intervened again, “Is it that urgent?”**

**“Extremely urgent,” Wei Wuxian answered, “It can’t be delayed.”**

**Jin Zixun scoffed and turned away, “Lan-zongzhu, let’s drink again.”**

**“Okay,” Wei Wuxian moved to the center of the room, “I’ll just say it right here. Jin-gongzi, please tell me. Do you know a person called Wen Ning?”**

**Jiang Cheng rose.**

Wen Qing shifted closer to Jiang Wanyin.

Wei Wuxian got the information she needed. Of course Jin Zixun wouldn’t be cooperative, but it still surprised her just how loyal Wei Wuxian was to them.

Or did he just use them as an excuse to burn bridges? It was getting harder and harder for Jiang Wanyin to explain his behavior. How could he, when he didn’t know the reasons behind it, the sacrifices? And Jiang Yanli was finally nearing a resolution with Jin Zixuan. She had what she had always hoped for, even if she never told him in words.

They were both nearing the time when they could stand on their own, when Wei Wuxian was becoming more of a burden than a support. Then Wen Qing stumbled back into his life, and he saw new people who needed him, who already knew why he was a demonic cultivator.

Jiang Wanyin wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

He didn't say anything, but what was there to say?

**"No," Jin Zixun answered.**

**"You definitely know a person called Wen Ning," Wei Wuxian continued, "A month ago, you were night hunting in Ganquan and chased an eight-winged bat to a place where remnants of the Wen Sect lived. The so-called detention place. You took a group of them away. Their leader was Wen Ning."**

**Jin Zixun turned to him, "I said I don't know him. I am too busy to remember the name of a bastard from the Wen Sect."**

**"Fine," Wei Wuxian relented, "I don't mind explaining it further to you. You couldn't catch the bat and ran into the Wen disciples who came to see what happened. So you forced them to put on Lure Flags as live bait. They were afraid to do so. One of them stood up and argued with you. He had a stutter. That person is Wen Ning."**

Wen Ning died. Otherwise how could he have been brought back as the Ghost General?

A month before the Banquet, Wen Ning was alive. At least, according to Wen Qing, who believed in the information so much she risked coming to Lanling in person.

Wen Ning was a meek person, but he was strong when he needed to be. He managed to knock out Wen Chao, Wen Zhuliu, and all the other Wen in Lotus Pier. He carried Jiang Wanyin on his back to Wei Wuxian. He didn't often show his strength, but it was there.

He should have been able to survive a regular prison.

He shouldn't have died at Qiongqi Pass.

**"During the delay, the bat ran away," Wei Wuxian watched Jin Zixun's face, "So you beat the Wen disciples badly and took them away." They've disappeared since then." Jiang Cheng came closer, "Do you want me to say more details? They haven't returned. Besides you, I really don't know who else I can ask."**

**"Wei Wuxian," Jin Zixun asked, "What do you mean? Are you asking me to hand them over? Do you want to stand up for those bastards?"**

**"It doesn't concern you whether I want to speak up for them or step on them," Wei Wuxian replied, "Just hand them over."**

**"Wei Wuxian, don't be so rampant!" Jin Zixun snapped, "How dare you be so rude as you stand here? Do you think you are so invincible that no one dares to offend you? Do you want to overturn the heavens?"**

**Wei Wuxian laughed, "Are you comparing yourself to the heavens? With all due respect, you really have thick skin."**

This was different from their argument on the mountain.

Lan Xichen noticed the difference. When Wei Wuxian argued to defend himself, he didn't try as hard as when he was arguing for someone else.

It was hard to watch this, knowing that he'd thought this was a bout of insanity brought about by his demonic cultivation. He saw danger when he should have recognized protective fury. He saw selfishness where there was only selflessness.

He took a deep breath and pushed away the shame. There would be time for apologies and reparations later. Hopefully a lifetime if Wei Wuxian agreed to marry Wangji after this. He would learn to be better in his judgments. He would try to avoid being so wrong about people in the future.

But now they were going to have proof of the Jin Sect's crimes. Jin Guangshan would deny his involvement. A-Yao would implicate him. Jin Zixun could go either way, but no one would listen to him anymore.

Everyone would agree it was wrong, but what about punishment?

Stripping Jin Guangshan of his position as Chief Cultivator was a given. As was his title as Sect Leader Jin, for his cruelty if the majority decided he knew, or his incompetence if they believed he didn't. Would Sect Leader Jin put up a fight if they tried to imprison him or put execution as a possible consequence?

Most of the time, criminals put up a fight. It meant less executions as those fights tended to end in death.

Lan Xichen hoped he put up a fight.

**Jin Guangshan laughed before Jin Zixun could attack, "It's not a big deal. You kids get angry so easily. But Wei-gongzi, fairly speaking, today you disrupt the private banquet of the LanlingJin. Isn't it improper?"**

**Wei Wuxian turned and greeted him, "Jin-zongzhu, I didn't want to mess with the banquet. My apologies. However, the lives taken by Jin-gonzgi are uncertain so far. I'm afraid that we can't save them if we wait any longer. I am grateful to one of them. He saved my life. I have no reason to wait. Please forgive me. I'll repay you in the future."**

**"Why can't you delay it?" Jin Guangshan asked, "Come and sit. I'll chat with you slowly."**

His father knew damn well why it couldn't be delayed.

Jin Zixuan adjusted where his sword was. There was little point in starting this fight early. He hoped it wouldn't come down to a fight, but they were in Koi Tower. He didn't know the loyalty of every single Jin disciple. Nor did he know what disciples of other Sects would do.

At least during the war, the enemy was clear.

Now, he was just on edge. Even A-Li knew better than to tell him to be patient.

Death was usually repaid in death. Blood with blood. While they did have cells in Koi Tower, keeping his father so close to the base of his power was just asking for more trouble. He could impose on another Sect to see to his imprisonment. Just following the Cloud Recesses' rules would be continuous torture for his father.

And that was without mentioning Zixun or Guangyao and whoever else was involved.

It was time to make decisions, to take action. It was time to prove that life was more valuable than power.

**Jiang Cheng ran to Wei Wuxian's side, "Wei Wuxian, what do you want to do?"**

**"That's kind of you, Jin-zongzhu, but I won't sit," Wei Wuxian rejected, "This can't wait. Please resolve it soon."**

**"You are anxious. I am more anxious," Jin Guangshan replied, "Calm down. Talking about this, we still have some problems yet to be solved. Since you are here, let's take the chance to tackle them together."**

The tension in the air could be cut with a knife.

No one dared speak.

Many noted that Jin Guangshan dismissed the topic of one man's life. Of course he did. He had no way of knowing what Wen Qionglin did for the Jiang Sect, or what Wen Qing did for Wei Wuxian. Any of them would have dismissed the life of one Wen with the same ease.

But to so quickly pivot to the matter of the Stygian Tiger Amulet...

It showed more what the true intentions of Jin Guangshan were.

**"Tackle what?" Wei Wuxian asked.**

**Jin Zixun smirked.**

**"Wei-gongzi, I mentioned it to you a few times before. Don't you remember?" Jin Guangshan demanded, "During the Sunshot Campaign, you used one thing."**

**"Oh," Wei Wuxian nodded, "The Stygian Tiger Amulet? Is there a problem?"**

**"It is extremely similar to the Yin Iron," Jin Guangshan stated, "You used it on the battlefield. It's very powerful. Besides, it accidentally hurt a lot of cultivators."**

Lan Qiren scoffed. This was why he avoided these types of events. It was all power plays.

They'd seen now the truth of who the Amulet hurt. It hurt no one who wasn't already affected by Wen Ruohan's Yin Iron. If they were truly to judge Wei Wuxian on who his actions hurt,

they should also mention those he saved. Yes, the affected were further hurt when they turned on each other.

But they no longer attacked the unaffected. They didn't spread their poison.

It was almost as though Jin Guangshan was blaming Wei Wuxian for the actions of Wen Ruohan.

Looking back, just who of the two of them was acting more like Wen Ruohan?

**"Please get to the point," Wei Wuxian interjected.**

**"This is the point!" Jin Guangshan insisted, "Among the four shards of the Yin Iron, three were destroyed. One is missing. Regardless of how your Amulet was forged, its power is too strong for anyone to master. Such an important thing is held in your hands alone. I'm afraid..."**

**"Jin-zongzhu, are you hinting at something?" Wei Wuxian asked, "Alright, please allow me to ask another question. Do you think that without the QishanWen, the LanlingJin are supposed to take their place?" Everyone startled at the question, "So everything should be handed over to you and everyone should follow your orders."**

**"Look at how the LanlingJin is acting," Wei Wuxian continued, "I almost thought it's the heyday of the Wen Sect again."**

A fair point.

They were so determined to find out where the Amulet came from, no one thought to who should have it. They were so focused on dealing with the threat Wei Wuxian was presented to be, that they didn't notice who was taking the place of the Wen Sect.

Nie Mingjue prayed the Amulet could be destroyed. He prayed that it was different from the Nie Sect's sabers.

As long as such a power existed, there would be those who would do anything to take it for themselves. Wei Wuxian was the only person who could control it. They'd seen the toll it took on him, both in body and spirit. A lesser man would be driven insane.

If it couldn't be destroyed...then it should disappear.

It would be a terrible ending to this if Wei Wuxian was forced to do as Lan Yi did, take the Amulet away and seal it as best he could, but it might be for the best.

The Jin Sect would be dealt with today, just as the Wen Sect was dealt with, and the Xue Sect before that. Nie Mingjue thought of the future beyond today.

**"Wei Wuxian, what are you talking about?" Jin Zixun demanded.**

**"Did I say something wrong?" Wei Wuxian asked.**

**Jin Guangshan glared at him.**

**Wei Wuxian turned to Jin Zixun, “At Nightless City, I could take what you did as revenge. But now that water is under the bridge, and you still forced people to be live bait. If they refuse, you beat and bully them. What’s the difference between you and the Wen Sect?”**

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji warned.**

**“Of course it’s different,” Jin Zixun argued, “The Wen Sect did evil things. This is what they deserve! It’s just an eye for an eye. Let them eat their own bitter fruits. What did we do wrong?”**

**“You should punish the people who bit you,” Wei Wuxian sneered, “Wen Qing and Wen Ning have never gotten their hands on anything bloody. Or do you want to execute a collective punishment?” He glanced back at Jin Guangshan.**

**“It’s righteous for anyone to kill the people of the Wen Sect,” Jin Zixun argued, “Why should we talk sense into them? It’s a pity that I killed too few of them.”**

**“Anyone of the Wen Sect wasn’t the agreement,” Nie Huaisang reminded the room.**

The agreement was to kill anyone who had spilled the blood of the allied forces. The agreement was to imprison the old, young, and weak. The agreement was to monitor them to ensure they didn’t have the last shard of Yin Iron hidden amongst them and that they weren’t planning on banding together and rebelling.

A massacre wasn’t what was agreed upon.

Yet that was what would be shown. He contemplated saying more, but they would see for themselves just how far the Jin Sect went momentarily. He just thought they could use the reminder that this wasn’t the decision of the four Major Sects. This was the decision of one.

Who in that one Sect should be obvious.

Then again, what was obvious to him wasn’t always obvious to others.

**Wei Wuxian took a shaky breath in, “You even kill the innocent casually. Then if I kill you today, will that be justified?” He placed a hand on Chenqing.**

**The minor Sects half drew their swords.**

**“Wei Wuxian,” Jiang Cheng warned.**

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji insisted.**

**“Wei-gongzi,” Jin Guangyao tried, “Don’t be irrational. Everything can be discussed.”**

**“Wei Wuxian!” Jin Guangshan warned, “I, Jin-zongzhu, am still here. Aren’t you being too improper?”**

MianMian scoffed. What was a little impropriety to someone's life?

She readied her own blade. It had been awhile since she fought a living opponent. It wasn't something she missed.

Qin Su leaned closer to her, "Do you have something I could borrow?"

As the daughter of a Sect Leader, she would have had some training with a blade. It did surprise her that her friend would make such a request.

Of course, she didn't have a backup sword, but she did have a knife, which she easily gave up.

Every young woman should have a knife.

**Wei Wuxian turned back to him, "If I, Wei Wuxian, want to kill someone, who can stop me? Who dares to stop me?" Resentment started to pour out of Chenqing.**

**"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji tried again, "Put down Chenqing."**

**Wei Wuxian didn't listen to him, "Jin Zixun! Presumably, everyone knows that I am not patient. I have wasted so much time with you here. I will only count to three. Three,"**

**Most of the minor Sect cultivators got ready to fight.**

**Wei Wuxian turned his fury on Jin Zixun, "Two!"**

Seeing this a second time made so much more sense.

Wei Wuxian wasn't challenging Jin Zixun out of nowhere. Jin Zixun had asked to fight him multiple times in the past. Jin Zixun had insulted him at every meeting, and behind his back. Jin Zixun was the one to take Wen Ning to Qiongqi Pass. Jin Zixun just said that he was allowed to kill anyone with the name Wen.

They thought Wei Wuxian was throwing around his power because he had it.

They now knew he was forcing the Jin Sect to cave to his demands the same way the Jin Sect was forcing others to. He was just giving them a taste of their own medicine.

He was in a hurry. Why should he spare them any courtesy?

**Jin Zixun glanced around nervously, "Forget it!" He relented, "Isn't it just for a few Wen-dogs? If you want them, go ahead. I don't want to talk to you anymore. Go to Qiongqi Pass and find them yourself."**

**"Look at you," Wei Wuxian fake-pouted, "Why didn't you just say it earlier?" He smirked, then turned to leave.**



**The smirk faded as soon as he locked eyes with Lan Wangji. As he passed Nie Huaisang, he looked sad, then determined.**

Wei Ying knew what he was doing.

Lan Wangji thought Wei Wuxian needed to calm down. He thought the resentment was taking control because he heard Wen Qionglin was in danger. He thought the Jin Sect provoked this. He knew now that Wei Ying was in complete control this whole time. He just used his reputation to his advantage to get information faster.

He knew as he walked out that this might be the last time he saw them.

Yet he walked out anyway because it was the right thing to do, and he wouldn't be getting any help out of them to do it.

**Jin Guangshan flipped his table.**

A Chief Cultivator shouldn't act like that.

His upset just made him look more suspicious.

**Wei Wuxian hurried down the streets of Lanling until he found Wen Qing again. He plastered on a smile, "I found them. Let's go."**

**Wen Qing rose too quickly and nearly collapsed. Wei Wuxian caught her, "You might as well rest first." He lowered her to the stoop, "I'll go alone. I promise I will save him."**

**"No. No," She trembled, "I have to go. I have to go."**

**"How can you go in this condition?" Wei Wuxian asked gently. Then he pulled some food out, "Eat something. Regain your strength." She accepted the food and began devouring it, "I promise you. After you finish eating this, I will take you there."**

Jiang Cheng tightened his arm around her.

The way she ate was the same way he did when Wei Wuxian told him he could get his golden core back.

He looked so selfish in comparison. He had been desperate for power and revenge. She just wanted her family to be safe. It was the same wish she'd made in Cloud Recesses. The same wish she had now.

Why did their wishes have to come true in such twisted ways? He got a golden core, but Wei Wuxian lost him. Wen Qing got her brother back, but as a fierce corpse.

**Wen Qing dug into it like a starved woman. She ate for a minute, then looked at him, "Where are A-Ning and the others?"**

**"Qiongqi Pass," Wei Wuxian whispered.**

**“I knew it,” Wen Qing lowered the bread, “I should never have left him, but I couldn’t help it. They transferred me to another city.” She started to cry, “When I came back, A-Ning and the others were gone.” Her breathing hitched, “I knew I shouldn’t have left him.”**

**“You need to believe in him,” Wei Wuxian said, “He can survive.”**

He didn’t.

Jiang Yanli held her son closer. If only she’d gone to the banquet. If only she hadn’t left him to follow Madam Jin. If only...

She held back tears. Crying wasn’t going to bring justice to the dead. A-Xuan’s gaze kept flickering between the projection of the memories and his relatives. A-Cheng was focused on comforting Wen Qing. Hanguang-Jun’s face was eerily blank.

None of them were ready for this.

**Wen Ning was surrounded by Jin disciples. One struck him with a hammer and he flew back.**

**The Jin disciples laughed.**

**“Go to hell,” One raised a lure flag and stabbed it through his torso. They continued to laugh over him as he tried to remove it.**

**They continued to laugh even as his struggling weakened.**

Wen Qing turned her face into Jiang Wanyin’s shoulder.

His other hand came up to embrace her. She shifted into a more comfortable position.

She thought she’d be ready to see her brother’s torment. She’d seen so many injuries in her time as a healer. It didn’t matter who was brought to her. She’d mastered the art of distancing herself from it all. But this was not something she’d seen.

She didn’t think she could relive this day at all.

“We were so close,” Was all she could think to whisper.

They could have been faster. If she hadn’t exhausted herself going to Lanling, she might have been able to ride a sword. It would have been risky in the rain, but it was a risk worth taking for A-Ning’s life. If Wei Wuxian weren’t so damn optimistic, he could have tried to get them there faster using demonic cultivation. They should have been faster.

“I know,” Jiang Wanyin whispered back.

He did know. He’d rewatched the worst day of his life and finding his parents’ corpses. It was better than any words of comfort he could have mustered. She let herself hide in his arms, let him protect her as she refused so long ago.

“If you want to leave, say the word,” He continued, “I’ve seen enough.”

**Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji approached Jin Guangyao. Lan Xichen held out a piece of cloth, “A-Yao. Are you okay?”**

**“I’m good,” Jin Guangyao assured him, “Please sit down.”**

**“You shall go and get changed,” Lan Xichen said.**

**Jin Guangyao sighed, “I can’t walk away. Wei-gongzi is too impulsive. How could he say something like that in front of everyone?”**

**“Isn’t what he said true?” Lan Wangji asked.**

**Jin Guangyao let out a huff, “Yes, it is. Just because it’s right, doesn’t mean he can say that to everyone’s face.”**

**“Nowadays, Wei-gongzi’s temperament has changed a lot,” Lan Xichen said.**

**Lan Wangji saluted.**

**“Go,” Lan Xichen gave his permission, “Do your best.”**

**Lan Wangji left.**

What Wei Wuxian said was the truth.

Even Lianfeng-Zun admitted so at the time. But if that wasn’t the right time, then when?

Qin Su knew the answer was never. They weren’t supposed to speak in defense of any Wen. They weren’t supposed to speak out against the Chief Cultivator. A matter should always be given the opportunity to be privately settled before it was aired out in front of everyone. But Wei Wuxian had asked to speak privately and was met with stalling.

Wei Wuxian was still the Head Disciple. Even with his cultivation and the suspicion, if Jin Guangshan’s position allowed his actions to go unquestioned, shouldn’t Wei Wuxian’s as well?

Or did they pick and choose who could be held accountable?

It was easier to be silent.

Maybe that was why no one spoke, even as they witnessed Wen Qionglin’s murder.

**It was night when Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian reached the camp. It was pouring rain. The first person they encountered was the old matriarch, carrying a child on her back and a lure flag in her arms.**

**“Popo!” Wen Qing yelled, causing her to stop. She came closer, “Popo.”**

**“Qing-guniang,” The old woman looked between them.**

**“Popo,” Wen Qing drew her attention, “Where is Fourth Uncle? A-Ning?”**

**“A-Ning,” The woman trembled, then turned away.**

An old woman, a child, and a lure flag.

How condemning.

There was still the matter of Wei Wuxian’s response to this. Jin Guangyao assumed that was what everyone was waiting for. Did the response equal the crime? Did he lose control? Did he make himself a fierce corpse to control to carry out that revenge?

Did it matter if both sides were obviously dabbling in demonic cultivation?

Jin Guangyao saw the way Er-ge’s eyes were trailed on the child. The child that would soon be under the care of Wei Wuxian, and thus Hanguang-Jun’s by extension. He felt a distant sense of loss at what could have been another nephew. He didn’t deserve to be anything to that child, not after what he did to the rest of his family.

**Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian continued.**

**“Halt,” The guards stopped them at the entrance, “Where are you from? Who allowed you to go inside?”**

**“I’m looking for someone,” Wen Qing answered.**

**“I don’t care if you’re looking for a person or a ghost,” The guard replied, “Go. If you don’t go, I...” He trailed off, finally noticing Wei Wuxian.**

**“A-Ning!” Wen Qing shouted, darting past the guard. She screamed her brother’s name as she ran through the camp. No one answered her, simply shaking their heads. Wei Wuxian watched her as she grew increasingly desperate.**

**“Get everyone over here!” Wei Wuxian ordered.**

They didn’t immediately go running.

Nie Mingjue highly doubted that it was because of any bravery there. They stayed because they didn’t think they’d done anything wrong. They tormented the elderly and children, but because of the Sect they belonged to, their lives didn’t matter.

If the Jin Sect had their way, Nie Mingjue never would have found out about this.

No, that wasn’t quite true. If he hadn’t watched Wen Qing and Wen Qionglin prove him wrong about everyone in the Wen Sect, he might have continued not caring. If the elders survived they could pass on the Wen Sect’s teachings to a new generation. If the children grew up, it was only natural for them to seek revenge.

It twisted his stomach to realize how easy it was to do evil.

**The guards lined up before him.**

**“Where are the newly sent cultivators of the Wen Sect?” Wen Qing asked.**

**The guards exchanged nervous looks. Wei Wuxian crossed his arms.**

**They shoved one forward.**

**“In the past few days, were any Wen cultivators sent here?” Wen Qing demanded, “One of them stammers. Have you seen him?”**

**“Every prisoner of war here is a Wen cultivator,” The guard answered, “Every day, there are new people sent here. They are all here.”**

**“I know he must be here,” Wen Qing argued.**

**“Almost every day, people would come and ask for some cultivators,” The guard said nervously, “I believe he escaped.”**

**“He would never escape,” Wen Qing rejected, “Since Popo and the others are here, A-Ning would never escape alone.”**

**Wei Wuxian moved to her side, “Are you saying that everyone is here?”**

**“Well...” The guard stammered, “All of them are here.”**

**“All of them are here?” Wei Wuxian repeated. The guard's eyes widened, “Alright. I’ll believe you for a moment that all the living people are here.” Wen Qing turned sharply to him, “What about the others?”**

**They tried to lie to him.**

**On some level, that meant they knew what they were doing was wrong, right? Or were they only lying because they didn’t want to risk Wei Wuxian’s fury?**

**Jin Zixuan kept his hand next to his sword’s hilt. Wen Qionglin was already dead. The guards killed him. Guards dressed in his Sect’s colors, along with a few other minor Sects. He didn’t see any of them around the room.**

**Surely they knew this was wrong? How could they have deviated so far from what was right?**

**The guard trembled.**

**Wei Wuxian lifted Chenqing, and the guards lowered themselves to the floor, “Gongzi, have mercy. I say...the corpses were thrown away in the valley. We just followed orders. It’s none of our business.”**

**Wei Wuxian lifted him off the ground, “Lead us there!”**

**They walked over the ridge to the valley, “It’s...in front of us.” The guard stammered, then fled.**

**Wei Wuxian walked into the valley. Everywhere he looked was another corpse, all strewn about in the mud. Most were already submerged in water.**

Qin Su’s immediate reaction was to try and count them.

To her horror, she realized she couldn’t. Many were piled on top of one another. Many more were only partly visible, suggesting there were more under the water they couldn’t see.

There were dead bodies everywhere during the war, but at least those were the result of conflict. Those were all the dead from battles. Those deaths had a purpose. Those people knew they might die when they became disciples of a cultivation Sect.

These were meaningless. This was cruelty at its highest form. Cruelty for the sake of being cruel.

She didn’t understand it. She didn’t think she wanted to understand it.

She glanced at her father, who looked as though he’d been struck by something. Maybe it was the realization of who the people he surrounded himself with were. She wondered if they would continue to associate with the Jin Sect at all, and if that would extend to the Yao and Ouyang Sects. She hoped he couldn’t rationalize this.

She shuddered. Everyone worried about the Yiling Patriarch as though he were a monster.

The real monsters were in here.

**Wen Qing took a few steps forward, then bent down to examine a body. Seeing it wasn’t her brother, she moved to the next. Then the next.**

**“A-Ning,” She cried, removing her hood so nothing obscured her vision.**

**Wen Qing crawled through a mound of corpses searching for her brother.**

**Wei Wuxian stuck Chenqing in his belt, then moved to the other side to start searching.**

**“A-Ning!” Wen Qing screamed, “A-Ning!”**

**She scanned all the bodies, her gaze lingering on one curled on its side. She slowly approached it and turned it onto its back.**

**Wen Ning’s face was beaten and bruised. The flag that killed him was still impaled in his body.**

**“A-Ning,” Wen Qing sobbed, shaking his body, “A-Ning! A-Ning!” She clutched him closer, “A-Ning!”**

**Wei Wuxian approached slowly.**

**In Wen Ning's hand was the talisman he'd gifted him in Gusu.**

Nie Huaisang almost couldn't bring himself to watch.

Wei Wuxian suffered so much. It wouldn't surprise him if he suffered a small bout of insanity here. His friend tried his best to keep his promises. He went so far to protect those he cared about only to find one dead clutching his physical promise of protection. It was too much for any person to handle.

Even if he did lose himself to rage, anyone coming upon such a sight who gave a damn would be angry. Already, those in the room with a conscience were getting mad.

So what if Wei Wuxian killed some guards? Look at how many prisoners those guards killed!

They should consider themselves lucky any of them survived at all.

Wei Wuxian was too merciful sometimes.

**Wei Wuxian went back to the camp. He saw the guards slaughtering the prisoners, and lifted Chenqing to his lips. It was easy to summon resentment to him.**

**The guards gathered together and lowered themselves once again to the ground, "Gongzi, have mercy." They begged.**

**Wei Wuxian stopped playing, watching them beg, "What kind of evil did you want to attract when you plunged the lure flags into their bodies? Or, what kind of demonic cultivation did you want to practice?"**

**The guards lowered themselves again.**

An accusation of demonic cultivation from the grandmaster of demonic cultivation himself.

This was what was truly happening at Qiongqi Pass and Wei Wuxian found them trying to cover it up by slaughtering the rest of the prisoners.

Torture, killing, experimentation. They didn't even give the dead any peace after death.

Were they trying to create enough resentment to challenge the power of the Amulet?

Who really was to blame then for the Ghost General?

**"Who killed them?" Wei Wuxian demanded.**

**"Wei-gongzi, please don't say that. Nobody dares to kill people here," One guard shouted.**

**"Right," The others agreed.**

**"Each of them was so careless at work and fell down the hill," He explained.**

**"Yes," Others chorused.**

**“Nobody dares to kill people?” Wei Wuxian repeated.**

**“Yes. Right. As true as fate.”**

**“No lies at all.”**

**“Fine. I see,” Wei Wuxian said, “Because the Wen Sect, they are not people in your eyes.” Resentment poured off him, “So, nobody here dares to kill people casually. Is that what you mean? Or do you really think I can’t tell that you’re lying?”**

It was amazing Wei Wuxian had the self-restraint to question them.

Jiang Cheng didn’t know what he would have done in the same situation. Part of him hoped he would also rage and kill the insane guards who somehow thought they weren’t carrying out a massacre. Another part of him was too highly aware of the political repercussions. Wei Wuxian could be disavowed from the Jiang Sect. Himself? Not so much.

It would have become a greater mess, even if he would have been given a trial. A real trial.

He rubbed Wen Qing’s back, recalling how horrible it was to gaze upon the corpses of his parents and disciples. The overwhelming sense of failure. He was supposed to lead them, to protect them, and he hadn’t been there when they’d needed him most.

He would have died had he been there, but it wasn’t a comfort.

**“The YunmengJiang and the LanlingJin have a good relationship,” One pleaded, “Wei-gongzi you can’t...”**

**Wei Wuxian sneered, “You are courageous. Are you threatening me?”**

**“No.”**

**“Have mercy.”**

**“Since you don’t admit it, I’ll let him point it out himself,” Wei Wuxian said. He started playing again.**

**Wen Ning came flying and attacked the guards as they made to flee.**

It was no less than they deserved, or what they inevitably would have faced even if Wei Wuxian hadn’t shown up.

**“A-Ning!” Wen Qing came running, “Stop!”**

**Wei Wuxian stopped playing, but Wen Ning didn’t stop. He kept fighting, even without direction.**

Was it truly Wei Wuxian who brought him back this much? Or did he just speed up a process that was happening regardless?



Either way, if both the fierce corpse and the demonic cultivator wanted the same revenge, who was to blame for the action that followed?

Could they even say Wei Wuxian killed the guards?

**“Wen Ning!” Wei Wuxian shouted.**

**“No,” Wen Qing pleaded, falling to the ground, “Wei Wuxian. Stop it now! A-Ning isn’t dead. Only his spirit is gone.”**

So many cultivators didn't recover from such an injury.

It was sad to see Wen Ning amongst those too.

Could he have been saved if they were able to go somewhere better equipped?

**Wei Wuxian reached out and brought the resentment into his body. He struggled with the now familiar screaming, spitting up blood. He then shouted, “Wen Ning! Wen Qionglin!”**

**Wen Ning stopped before he killed the final remaining guard. He let out a roar, then fell to his knees.**

**The guard escaped.**

This wasn't the massacre it was described to be either.

No one was surprised.

Of all the accusations against Wei Wuxian, none were true.

He didn't steal the Yin Iron fragment from Xue Yang. He found his own and used that to forge into the Amulet. He didn't harm anyone with the Amulet. No one who wasn't already harmed by Wen Ruohan's Yin Iron. He wasn't going around experimenting with demonic cultivation. He'd just been living a peaceful life with his siblings in Lotus Pier.

He didn't pick fights with the Jin Sect during the Phoenix Mountain Crowd Hunt. If anything, the Jin Sect picked a fight with him. Even the banquet wasn't as bad as it was made out to be later.

Now this? Qiongqi Pass? The reason Wei Wuxian and the Wen Remnants were exiled to the Burial Mounds for the last year?

It was also a fabrication. If anyone was massacred there, it wasn't the guards. It was the prisoners.

**Lan Wangji heard the roar. He walked up the path, his umbrella protecting him from the rain. Fleeing guards ran past him.**

**He stopped one, “What happened?”**

**“Someone came to their rescue.” The guard said, “He resurrected the dead to kill people!”**

Already retelling events to favor themselves.

It was despicable.

**Wei Wuxian loaded Wen Ning onto a horse, then carried Wen Qing with him as he went to search for survivors. He kicked down a door and for a group huddled on the floor.**

**“Wen-guniang,” One of the men recognized her.**

**“What did you do to Wen-guniang?” Another demanded.**

**“Nothing,” Wei Wuxian answered, “Are you the people under Wen Ning? Cut the crap. Stand up.” He led them out, to where the others had gathered more horses.**

**“Everyone gets a horse,” Wei Wuxian ordered, “Hurry up.”**

**“Wei-gongzi, this...” One trailed off.**

**“There’s no time to explain. Mount a horse and go!” Wei Wuxian shouted.**

**They obeyed.**

**Wei Wuxian mounted his horse last and took the lead.**

Wei Wuxian had also been lied to. He’d been led to believe that this was what the other Sects wanted. He’d been told that any protest on his part would be taken as a protest from the Jiang Sect.

He couldn’t return to Lotus Pier. Going there would only bring this entire mess down on Jiang Wanyin’s head and ruin any chance of Jiang Yanli marrying Jin Zixuan. He couldn’t go to Gusu either, as Hanguang-Jun had also refused to challenge his brother’s decision. Qinghe was out because of Chifeng-Zun’s hatred of Wens, even if he was friends with Nie Huaisang.

The cultivation world had been turning against him since the end of the Sunshot Campaign.

Wei Wuxian knew that he would stand alone in his defense, so he went to the most defensible position for a demonic cultivator. The Burial Mounds.

It was the only thing he could do.

Just like all his ‘choices’ they’d seen. It wasn’t much of a choice when the other option was unacceptable.

**Lan Wangji waited for him on the road.**

**Wei Wuxian drew them to a halt. They stared at each other. Lan Wangji took in the sight of the survivors.**

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian started, “Are you here to stop me?”**

**“Wei Ying, where are you going?” Lan Wangji asked back.**

**“I have no idea,” Wei Wuxian answered, “But the world is wide. There must be a place for us.”**

**“Think again,” Lan Wangji refuted, “If you go, it will be considered a rebellion against orthodoxy with no way back.”**

There was only one place for them if they wanted to survive for any amount of time.

Lan Xichen wondered if he didn't tell Wangji on purpose. Certainly if Wangji knew the hell Wei Wuxian was returning to he would have tried harder to convince him to...what? Abandon the Wen Remnants? Go to Lanling and plead his case? What case? He'd been told this was what the Sects agreed to.

Or did he think Wangji would go with him if he knew the truth?

Was this his way of sparing him the pain that would come on this path?

He should have gone with Wangji. He'd hoped Wangji would get some closure out of seeing who Wei Wuxian had truly become, but it had turned into the opposite? Instead of Wangji realizing Wei Wuxian was no longer as righteous and heroic as he'd been before the war, he'd realized the opposite.

Wangji was part of the group in the wrong. By doing nothing, he was supporting evil.

**“Rebellion against orthodoxy?” Wei Wuxian repeated, “What kind of orthodoxy is that? Lan Zhan, do you still remember the promise we made together?”**

**Lan Wangji nodded.**

**“I wished to stand with justice and live with no regrets,” Wei Wuxian continued, “Tell me now, who is stronger and who is weaker? Who is right and who is wrong?”**

**“Wei Ying!” Lan Wangji pleaded.**

**“Is this the promise we pledged our lives to keep?” Wei Wuxian cried.**

**Lan Wangji held his sword tighter, but had no response.**

**“I only regret that I didn't stop the Jin Sect who took living people as bait in the crowd hunt,” Wei Wuxian said, “Otherwise, Wen Ning wouldn't have come to such an end. I missed the chance to save him. I won't give this one up now.” He paused, “I must save him.”**

**Wei Wuxian pulled Chenqing from his belt and held it between them, “Lan Zhan, if I am to fight them, I'd prefer to fight with you.” He declared, “If I am doomed to death, at least, I could be killed by you. That would be worth it.”**

Did Hanguang-Jun hear the message there?

Ever since Wei Wuxian's return from the Burial Mounds, he'd challenged their connection. He constantly reminded him that he knew his own mind best, that getting too close was meddling in matters that weren't their concern. He would go back and forth between using his birth name and courtesy name.

But here, in a moment of desperation, the truth came out.

Hanguang-Jun did know Wei Wuxian. Knew his mind, knew his heart, knew his intentions. Wei Wuxian trusted him more than he trusted himself.

If he were truly in the wrong, Wei Wuxian trusted Hanguang-Jun to stop him.

No one else.

**Lan Wangji stared at him, bowed his head, and turned away.**

**Wei Wuxian lowered Chenqing, and urged his horse forward.**

**They rode past Lan Wangji.**

**As soon as they were gone, Lan Wangji turned to stare after them. He let the umbrella fall to the ground, let the rain soak him and hide his tears.**

"Did you know?" Chifeng-Zun demanded.

"Know what?" Jin Guangshan replied.

"Don't play dumb. This was a prison run by your Sect," The Nie Sect Leader progressively got louder, "Your Sect killed all those innocents! Children! Elders!"

"Where was this anger when the matter was first brought up?" Jin Guangshan wondered, "If I remember right, it was agreed that none of the Wen Sect were innocent."

"Important information has now come to light," Zewu-Jun argued, "We can no longer ignore your crimes."

Wen Qing felt Jiang Wanyin's breathing deepen as the arguing started. She knew she should look at the room, participate in the argument, but it was all she could do to slowly release the death grip she had on the robes in front of her. She forced herself to breathe, to relax her muscles until she could let go. Then she turned away.

"My crimes? Do you think I alone was responsible for this?" Jin Guangshan asked.

"Shouldn't a Sect Leader bear some responsibility for the actions of their disciples?" Jiang Wanyin demanded, "Or are you saying your disciples have no respect for you?"

"I believe, Jiang-zongzhu, that my father is trying to blame Zixun and I," Lianfeng-Zun said, his voice calm, "As though we weren't just following orders."

“Don’t try to get out of this, you bastard,” Madam Jin snapped.

“I’m not,” Lianfeng-Zun tilted his head, “The Jin Sect-”

“This is nonsense,” Jin Zixun rose, “What was said that was untrue? The Wen Sect got what was coming to them!”

“Ah yes, because the Jin Sect lost so much during the war,” Nie Huaisang commented pointedly.

“I’ve heard enough out of you!” Jin Zixun blustered, reaching to draw his sword.

The Nie Sect rose to defend its heir. Some of the Jin Sect rose to protect their own as well.

“Enough!” Lan Qiren snapped, “No one Sect should control the survival of another. The Jin Sect was entrusted to monitor the surviving Wen. Not systematically kill them off and experiment on them.”

“Are you also going to start a fight over this?” Jin Guangshan asked flippantly, but was notably tense.

“If it will prevent you from going on to murder another Sect later at your will? Certainly,” Nie Huaisang clenched his hands into fists, “Or is that part of being Chief Cultivator I didn’t know about?”

“You can’t speak to my uncle that way,” Jin Zixun interjected.

“What respect is owed to the murderer of innocents?” Chifeng-Zun growled.

“Then we should strip Guangyao of his title,” Jin Guangshan’s lip twitched in a thinly veiled sneer, “Or is the killing of allies better than that of innocents?”

“Don’t start,” Jin Zixuan snapped, “Guangyao has already agreed to face justice for his crimes. Will you do the same?”

“Oh? You already have an agreement?” Jin Guangshan leaned back, “Is that how it is? My own sons are trying to force me out. I expected this from Guangyao, but not from you.”

“I expected my father to be above murdering children,” Jin Zixuan didn’t falter, “I guess we can both be disappointed.”

“You want the power Wei Wuxian has,” Lianfeng-Zun spoke up, “That’s what all this has been for. You want the Amulet. You want Chenqing. You know he’ll never give it to you, so we’ve been steadily working against him. You were hoping to lead a siege of the Burial Mounds and kill the villain you created in people’s minds.”

“Why should anyone believe a word you say?” Jin Guangshan asked.

“Because it is obvious even without his testimony,” Zewu-Jun cut in, “Will you submit yourself to justice?”

“What justice?” Jin Guangshan narrowed his eyes, “Will children decide my punishment?”

“If they must,” Hanguang-Jun rose and swiftly pulled out his sword, “Shall I use Inquiry to ask the children killed at Qiongqi what they think?”

“You dare!” Jin Guangshan yelled.

“I do,” Hanguang-Jun stepped closer, “Submit yourself to justice.”

It wasn't a request this time. As always, there was a weight to Hanguang-Jun's words that no one else could achieve.

The Jin Sect framed Wei Wuxian and sent them into exile. The Jin Sect separated Hanguang-Jun from the love of his life. There may be an argument in there about bias in judgment, but Jin Guangshan wisely swallowed it back.

“This is outrageous!” Jin Guangshan glanced towards his allies.

Sect Leader Yao and Sect Leader Ouyang may be fools, but they were opportunistic fools. Seeing that the world was turning against him, they also turned against him.

It was chaotic from there. Wen Qing stayed seated with Jiang Wanyin as they hastily made arrangements for guards and cells. Lianfeng-Zun stuck close to Zewu-Jun and Jin Zixuan, helping decide which Jin disciples were trustworthy, and where other Sects' disciples needed to step in.

It was a far cry from justice, but it was a start.

Wen Qing was far too relieved to keep track of time. The room was notably emptier when Lianfeng-Zun looked to Jin Zixuan, “Shall we continue the viewing, Jin-zongzhu?”

Jin Zixuan flinched at the title, then nodded, “For everyone's peace of mind.”

A year living on the Burial Mounds would be bad for anyone. Just not bad in the ways they expected.

## Chapter End Notes

I had this entire fic to think about how to handle this, and I still totally blanked once I got here. Sorry if this disappointed but I'm sticking with it.

Also, I don't know when this went from being in seven collections to thirteen, but I thank whoever keeps deciding to put this in them!

Finally, please be kind in your comments! Or, if you're not sure if it comes off as kind, please use tone indicators to doubly ensure your message is received as intended. I

really hope people who dislike this story haven't read to this point, but one mean comment really sets me back.

Hope you enjoyed!

# The Yiling Patriarch Is...

## Chapter Summary

A farmer? A father?

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jin Zixuan hoped his hands weren't trembling. It was one thing to plan to take over the Jin Sect. It was another to sit here and have Guangyao calling him "Jin-zongzhu" and mean it.

His father and cousin were confined to their rooms. Their fates would be decided later. He wouldn't mar his son's birth celebration with their deaths, but the celebration was only for a few more days. About a third of his disciples were similarly detained. He was happy for the help of the other Sects when it came to keeping them in line, really.

Some whispered that it made him look weak, but he was beyond caring about looking dependent. He'd seen for himself now how quickly strength turned to domination, how some climbed to the top using the bodies of their victims as a ladder. It would haunt him for the rest of his life.

He ignored all the looks sent towards Guangyao as well. He wasn't sure what people were thinking, and he was too angry to spare it more than a thought.

What did it look like, that his half-brother was there despite the blood on his hands? Hypocritical? Sensitive to his situation? Or did they think Guangyao was manipulating him? His mother argued that he should be locked up like the rest...

Jin Zixuan steeled himself. What did it matter what everyone thought? After seeing how far they could be misled, he truly only cared for a handful of people's opinions.

This was almost over. Then they could bring Wei Wuxian back and move on to the true criminals soon.

**Wei Wuxian and the Wen Remnants rode towards the cloud of darkness shrouding the Burial Mounds. They sold off their horses in Yiling. Wei Wuxian led them up a path, further into the grounds.**

**"Where is this?" The man holding a child asked.**

Lan Xichen focused entirely on the child. It had been hard to see him at Qiongqi Pass. Then there were so many other things to focus on. Now, in the murky light of the Burial Mounds, he could see the boy closer.



Wen Yuan, who would soon become Wei Yuan or Lan Yuan. He really needed to talk to Wen Qing about that. While this viewing would grant her people salvation, the cultivation world could ignore a group of the weak and elderly living in Lotus Pier. However, the Wen name was an unneeded burden for one child to bear.

It would only make his life harder. Even the Wei name would bring added struggles.

If he were adopted as Lan Yuan, people might forget who he was born as. Even if they never forgot, they would see that he was being raised as a Lan, not a Wen, and there was no threat of the Wen Sect revitalizing itself or the child becoming a demonic cultivator.

He supposed Jiang Wanyin and Wen Qing could adopt A-Yuan, but being raised with the other Wen, even with the Jiang name, would raise unwanted questions.

Lan Xichen had to acknowledge his own bias. He could come up with hundreds of logical reasons to let Wangji raise A-Yuan, but there was only one reason in his heart. If Wei Wuxian's life wasn't shortened by demonic cultivation, he was still without a core. His life would definitely be shorter than Wangji's.

Yes, they would make the best of their time together, but a child would ensure Wangji didn't fade away from grief when Wei Wuxian passed.

**Wei Wuxian finally stopped, "This place? The Burial Mounds."**

**"This...Can people live here?"**

**"Why can't they?" Wei Wuxian asked, "I once lived here for three months." He held up Chenqing, "We are old friends now." He faced forward, "Follow me."**

**"Let's go," The Wen Remnants agreed.**

They'd truly made the world a terrible place if the innocent needed to seek refuge in hell.

**Back at a smaller meeting of the Sects, everyone sat in silence.**

**"Guangyao," Jin Guangshan started, addressing the only standing person in the room, "Tell everyone here what Wei Wuxian did."**

Jin Guangyao bit back a burst of inappropriate laughter at the low muttering from his father's appearance. He could feel Madam Jin's glare on the side of his head, but he would deal with whatever retribution she decided upon when she came at him with it. It was easy for Jin Zixuan to turn on his father. So far, he hadn't had to turn on his mother.

He didn't think it would feel so different to sit beside his half-brother.

All it would take was a word and Jin Zixuan could have him removed. It had been the same with their father, and the same when he'd served in the Nie Sect.

But Jin Zixuan wasn't as tyrannical as their father, nor did he have Da-ge's temper. So it was different. He wouldn't delude himself into thinking his position was anything close to secure.

Public opinion could be so easily swayed. Jin Zixuan would bend if pressured.

Still, he found himself relaxing now that Jin Guangshan was no longer in the room. He was still sitting here without him. He could still have a place here without him. For so long he'd been striving for his acceptance so he could be somebody, but of course he was always somebody without Jin Guangshan.

He'd just forgotten who.

**Jin Guangyao bowed, "This time, in Qiongqi Pass, Wei Wuxian made Wen Ning into a puppet who killed a lot of people. Many overseers were killed and about fifty remnants of the Wen Sect fled. Having led them into the Burial Mounds, Wei Wuxian took the Palace of Xue Chonghai and set many barriers at the foot of the mountain. Our people can't step into the region."**

**"He's really causing a lot of trouble this time," A Lan disciple commented.**

There was no need for commentary as they rewatched this meeting. The meeting that sealed Wei Wuxian's fate as the Yiling Patriarch. The meeting where they thought they were in the right and were proven so very wrong.

Jiang Wanyin was forced to give another public apology, but was hounded by Sect Leaders Ouyang and Yao.

Many tried to mutter disapprovingly, but were any of them better?

Jiang Wanyin tried to say that Wen Qing had helped them during the war, only for Chifeng-Zun to say they should have done more. That they seemed to be an ally of Wen Ruohan's, and therefore needed to be punished. Even if there was nothing they could have possibly done to stop Wen Ruohan.

Jiang Wanyin's expression as he realized there was no way he could persuade the group of the truth was forever burned into their memories. They couldn't help but compare his silence to Wei Wuxian's last conversation with Hanguang-Jun. But who could condemn him for not trying harder when he already knew the pain of losing his Sect? How could he endanger them again?

Wei Wuxian would do the right thing if it lost him everything. There weren't many who would do the same.

Then came more lies. Lies about what people were saying. Jin Guangshan spouted rumors he likely started and perpetuated as though they were truths. It was obvious now he was trying to turn Jiang Wanyin against his brother. The Yin Iron was brought up as a potential betrayal, then lies about what was said on Phoenix Mountain...

When Hanguang-Jun argued with the lies, he was once again met with stubborn opposition to the truth. As though Wei Wuxian said any words not in Hanguang-Jun's hearing during the hunt.

Even Hanguang-Jun stood down in the face of such willful ignorance.

Then came Luo Qingyang's defense. The guards were killed for a reason. That reason being the torture and wanton killing of Wens. She pointed out the hypocrisy of considering him a killer for his actions during war time, and the idiocy of believing the guards' accounts when they were the ones accused of a crime.

It was all there to see, but none of them were willing to look.

**“Luo-guniang,” Sect Leader Yao scolded, “I think you are saying nonsense because you feel guilty, right?”**

**MianMian rolled her eyes and stood up, “Yao-zongzhu, please explain what you mean by ‘feeling guilty’?”**

**Sect Leader Yao rose, “Shall I explain? You know it very well.”**

**“Don’t waste time with her,” MianMian’s companion interjected, “How could she even be a member of the Jin Sect? I feel ashamed standing with her.”**

**MianMian looked away, and let out a disbelieving huff, “Okay. You all speak so loud. You all make sense.” She turned to Jin Guangshan, “Such being the case, I will secede from the Sect.” Jin Zixuan gaped as she removed her gold outer robe and sash, throwing them to the floor. Then she turned and left.**

**Lan Wangji took up his sword and followed her out.**

Three people tried to defend Wei Wuxian’s actions, but only one was free to leave their Sect.

“That was amazing,” Qin Su murmured, smiling at her friend.

Luo Qingyang, who refused to bow to peer pressure. She saw that everyone was accusing her of being compromised and decided she deserved better. It was almost funny, how the same argument was given to discredit Hanguang-Jun and Luo Qingyang. Because Wei Wuxian was apparently so seductive, obviously everyone who knew him was wrong about him.

Naturally, it was much better to trust the judgment of strangers.

“Have you thought of joining another Sect?” Chifeng-Zun inquired.

“Have the Sects really changed?” Luo Qingyang asked back, “Or would I still just be...”

A woman. To them, someone more emotional. Someone inherently weaker. As if the great immortal of their time wasn’t a woman.

“I could be Sect Leader after my father,” Qin Su interjected, as Chifeng-Zun didn’t look like he had an answer, “The Qin Sect would be honored to have you.”

It wasn’t something Qin Su contemplated much. There was this expectation that she would marry into another Sect. Finding a good husband and taking care of a household was what

her father thought would make her happy. It was certainly an easier path rather than constantly fighting to be heard or respected.

Seeing this gave her the confidence to consider taking the position. If this was what the majority of Sect Leaders were like, she wouldn't make such a bad Sect Leader herself. She would certainly do better than half of the idiots surrounding her.

**“Jiang Cheng-zongzhu, I think Wei Wuxian planned this for a long time,” Jin Guangshan continued once everyone else sat down, “That they went to the Burial Mounds this time. After all, with his capability now, it is not that difficult for him to build his own Sect. He wants to take this opportunity to develop his own Sect and be unrestrained.”**

More lies, of course, and it was plainly obvious what Jin Guangshan wanted.

He wanted to make Wei Wuxian look like a threat. To make his defiance a personal insult rather than what it was, his morality at odds with reality.

**Jiang Cheng rose again, and saluted, “Jin-zongzhu, that’s enough. I will go to the Burial Mounds myself to end the issue.”**

**“That’s the wise decision,” Jin Guangshan agreed, “Jiang Cheng-zongzhu, dealing with someone or something, you can’t be too generous with them. As for the ominous Stygian Tiger Amulet...”**

**“I will ask him to hand it in and give everyone an account,” Jiang Cheng finished.**

**“Well, you all heard that!” Jin Guangshan waited for nods, then turned and sat down.**

Nie Huaisang hoped his manipulations weren't so obvious in retrospect.

He then dismissed the thought. Of course his manipulations weren't as obvious. His desires weren't as obvious. He'd also never be as arrogant as Jin Guangshan when it came to victory. As it was, his mind raced to what a victory would mean here.

Ideally, Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian would find a way to stop his brother from eventually Qi deviating. This viewing was purely to give them time for that. This reprieve wouldn't last forever, but if Wen Qing married Jiang Wanyin she would be protected for longer. Wei Wuxian was another matter, which was why he needed to pay attention.

For all that necromancy was scorned as immoral, there would undoubtedly be benefits. They were persuaded to overlook Wei Wuxian's actions during the Sunshot Campaign because his presence benefitted them. If he could really bring back the dead, and not just as fierce corpses...well, there was a reason Jin Guangshan wanted him.

**Jin Guangyao walked out with his sworn brothers, “So poor is the table of Jiang-zongzhu. He even crushed a cup with his hand. It seems like he is really angry.” Nie Mingjue glared at him, and he looked to Lan Xichen, “Er-ge, where is Hanguang-Jun? I saw that he left early.”**

**Lan Xichen nodded, and they followed his gaze to see MianMian taking her leave of Lan Wangji.**

**“That girl has backbone,” Nie Mingjue commented.**

MianMian hadn't thought she'd be complimented for that.

Seeing herself become a rogue cultivator wasn't as mortifying as she'd thought it would be. She'd been so angry then, she knew she hadn't been the most eloquent. She could have said a lot more but there wasn't any point. They didn't want to see. They wouldn't listen.

She quite liked the freedom of being a rogue cultivator. She didn't feel any urge to go back to serving under any man, no matter how honorable.

Qin Su's offer was more tempting. There had been female Sect Leaders before, but they'd always come with a bunch of annoying men to advise them. They'd been restricted. They couldn't form alliances with male Sect Leaders because any friendship was misinterpreted as romantic. Just like Wei Wuxian saving her was misinterpreted as romantic.

After this, maybe they would be less likely to start rumors without proof. Maybe a female Sect Leader could get somewhere without idiots trying to hold her back.

**“Yes,” Jin Guangyao agreed, “Yet...” He turned back, “It's really difficult to deal with the issue of Wei-gongzi.”**

**“Is Wei-gongzi so capable that he could even resurrect the dead?” Lan Xichen asked.**

**“According to one of the overseers, Wei Wuxian did make the dead Wen Ning into a puppet,” Jin Guangyao reported.**

**“Wei Wuxian, you really messed this up,” Nie Mingjue growled.**

**“But the case of the Yin Iron isn't clear yet,” Lan Xichen pointed out, “Maybe Wei Wuxian didn't do it.”**

**“If it weren't him, then who could it be?” Nie Mingjue demanded, “Wei Wuxian depends on his capabilities and refuses to follow the righteous course.” He stared intensely at Jin Guangyao, “You have to take him as a warning.”**

**Jin Guangyao smiled and bowed his head, “Yes, I will follow your words.”**

**With that, Nie Mingjue left, followed by Nie Huaisang.**

Nie Mingjue assumed that was the last time they would be seeing him in these memories. Just like everyone else, he made up his mind and then went home.

He still had that luxury.

It was just as Lady Luo said. Everyone was so eager to talk, but no one actually listened. He listened to Xichen in Nightless City. Why was he so deaf to reason here? Was he so quick to

turn on Wei Wuxian at the mere thought of his betrayal having occurred back at Qinghe?

Was he truly angry at Wei Wuxian then, or just hoping this lesson of what happened to traitors would stick to Jin Guangyao?

Nie Mingjue could feel the tension in the room. They were all aware that there was more blame to go around than just what belonged to those confined. There was still the lingering question of who should be the next Chief Cultivator. Was there anyone here who was worthy of that position? How could anyone's judgment be trusted when they'd all been so wrong?

He'd half thought to take the title himself until he saw the massacre at Qiongqi Pass. He was reminded of his callousness in the aftermath.

Now, he wasn't so sure.

**Back in Cloud Recesses, Lan Wangji knelt before Lan Qiren.**

**"Wangji, do you regret it?" Lan Qiren demanded, "I didn't punish you when you stole from the forbidden chamber because I wished you could be self-retrospective. You shouldn't have gone to Qiongqi Pass and let Wei Wuxian and the Wen underlings go!"**

**Lan Wangji's gaze snapped up from the floor.**

**Lan Qiren hit the table, "Should you make one mistake after another? What's the use of the family disciplines that I have asked you to recite? Answer me, what's the 52nd rule of our family's discipline?"**

**"Do not associate with evil," Lan Wangji recited.**

**"Did you forget your father's lesson?" Lan Qiren demanded.**

"His father?" Wen Qing whispered.

She should have suspected there was trauma there. No one so young put up defenses until after they'd been attacked. There was a reason Hanguang-Jun kept a distance from others. There was a reason he was so conflicted when it came to Wei Wuxian. There was a reason he didn't follow him to the Burial Mounds.

"I never met Qingheng-Jun," Jiang Wanyin whispered back, "Or Madam Lan."

"Neither did I," Nie Huaisang added, "I suspect something scandalous went down but...well, Lan don't gossip."

So even Nie Huaisang, with all his knowledge, didn't know this?

Well, it wasn't any of Wen Qing's business unless it concerned that idiot.

"You'd think we have enough secrets," Jiang Wanyin muttered.

**Lan Wangji's face immediately twisted into hurt, "My mother, she..."**

**“Hold your tongue!” Lan Qiren interrupted as Lan Wangji regained control of himself. Lan Qiren started coughing, then rose and approached him, “Wangji, I have been taking care of you since you were a child, and I will always take you as my own son. I am always strict with you because I wish that you can stick to the right path.”**

**“I don’t want you to repeat your father’s tragedy,” Lan Qiren finished, “That’s what I wanted to say to you. I hope you can choose the right path yourself.” He paused, “You may leave.”**

**Lan Wangji bowed to him, his eyes slightly red with unshed tears, then he left.**

“Hm,” Jiang Yanli pursed her lips.

She thought about pressing the matter publicly, but held back the impulse. A-Xian’s reasons for holding back were obvious now. He didn’t have a golden core. He couldn’t stop using demonic cultivation. He was smart enough to know that there were ambitious people out there willing to ruin his life to get the Amulet. He pushed away everyone he loved to protect them.

Hanguang-Jun’s reasons were his own. She attributed most to the strict nature of his Sect. Still, she ached to understand him more personally so she could begin to be a good sister to him. She thought Lan Qiren could be harsh, but not this harsh to his nephews. To his own sons, by the man’s admission.

What had happened to their parents to make their family like this?

“I know I was wrong about Wei Wuxian,” Lan Qiren said out loud, reassuring them once more as he saw her displeasure, “There will be no complaint from me should he come to Cloud Recesses.”

A-Cheng scoffed, but settled quickly, not demanding an explanation either.

Harsh words were spoken out of anger. Anger that came from fear. As long as harsh words did not become harsh action, Jiang Yanli could keep her silence.

**Back at Koi Tower, Jiang Yanli heard a noise outside her door. Upon opening them, she found Jin Zixuan starting to walk away. He turned back to her, “I was just taking a walk.”**

**Jiang Yanli stepped out of her rooms and bowed to him, “Jin-gongzi.”**

**He bowed back, “Jiang-guniang.” He cleared his throat awkwardly.**

**“Jin-gongzi, I have to find A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli bowed again, “Excuse me.”**

**“I don’t mind!” Jin Zixuan called after her as she walked away, causing her to stop, “Jiang-guniang, I...I know what happened today, but this is Wei Wuxian’s business-”**

As though Wei Ying’s business were not his sister’s business.

Lan Wangji immediately dismissed the uncharitable thought. All Jiang Yanli had tried to do was protect her brother. She defended him on Phoenix Mountain. It wasn't her fault that tradition barred her from the banquet afterwards. If she'd been there, then Wei Ying might have been calmer.

Wei Ying wouldn't have needed to resort to threats, as Jin Zixuan would have given her everything she wanted.

Her staying in Koi Tower was what Wei Ying would have wanted too. Between suffering with him or pursuing the love of her life, Wei Ying would have asked her to leave him. If it were any other person asking her to stay, Jiang Yanli would have left.

It was a choice Lan Wangji had been too cowardly to make. Love over family.

**“Jin-gongzi, as for involving you in this mess, I’m so sorry,” Jiang Yanli apologized, “Tomorrow...Tomorrow, A-Cheng and I will leave Koi Tower.”**

**Jin Zixuan ran up to her, “You’ll leave? Where are you going?” He stepped closer, forcing her to step back, “To the Burial Mounds? Would you please not go there?”**

**She slowly looked at him, then looked down and started to walk away.**

**Jin Zixuan grabbed her arm, “Jiang-guniang, please stay here. Stay in Koi Tower.” She turned back to look at him, “No matter how people slander you, trust me, I will take care of you for my whole life.”**

**Some blossoms fell from the trees.**

**Jiang Cheng turned away from the sight of them, and left alone for the Burial Mounds.**

Jiang Cheng briefly wondered if anything would have changed if A-Jie came with him. Would Jin Zixuan have come as well, insisting on guarding her? Could he have seen what torment his Sect was causing and put an end to it? What would A-Jie have said? Would she have agreed with him about not fighting a hopeless cause?

Would she have sided with Wei Wuxian? Could she still have married Jin Zixuan, knowing what monsters she would face in Lanling?

Just like with the golden core, as much of a farce as that was, Jiang Cheng knew keeping her in the dark would let her be happier. If anyone deserved happiness, it was his sister.

**Wen Ning was covered in talismans. Wen Ning’s hand was twitching, the motion being what woke Wei Wuxian up. Wei Wuxian smiled, then heard Wen Qing calling for him.**

**Wen Qing tossed him some food.**

**Wei Wuxian caught it and started eating, then pouted, “Wen Qing, you scorched it again.”**



**“Wei Wuxian,” Wen Qing ignored his complaint, “Why didn’t you answer when I was calling you?”**

**“You know that we have stayed here for three days and nights,” Wei Wuxian replied, “Why do you still ask?”**

**“Still talking a lot,” Wen Qing came closer and swiped at the food, “Don’t eat it then.”**

**Wei Wuxian held it away from her, “Don’t snatch it.” He paused before taking another bite, “By the way, he can hear words now. Talk with him more often, he may wake up earlier.”**

**Wen Qing blinked, then sat by her brother, “A-Ning.” She stroked what was visible of his face, “Can you hear me? A-Ning.”**

How did Wei Wuxian know what the best doctor in their generation didn’t?

Nie Huaisang couldn’t understand half the talismans set up around Wen Ning. This was obviously beyond any healing with traditional cultivation, but was this in the realm of necromancy? To bring back someone’s consciousness after it had been lost...well, it wasn’t that far a step from raising the dead.

He had to wonder if Wei Wuxian had come up with a method for true necromancy, to bring back someone totally gone.

It must have a terrible price. Then again, that wouldn’t stop the desperate. If it existed, that sort of technique deserved to be forgotten. There would be too many people willing to kill others to bring back those they’d lost.

No, the sacrifice of others wasn’t Wei Wuxian’s interest. If he did come up with a way to bring someone back to life, to summon an entire soul back into a body, then a Wei Wuxian method would be a self-sacrificial method.

How horrifying for the resurrected loved one, but Wei Wuxian never noticed how much his sacrifices hurt his loved ones. Not enough to stop himself from continuing to sacrifice.

**The next morning, or what could be taken as morning, Wei Wuxian watched as the Wen Remnants went about plowing the soil and building structures. He approached one of the older men, “Fourth Uncle.”**

**Fourth Uncle stuck his shovel down and leaned on it, “Wei-gongzi, shall we reclaim the whole barren land today?”**

**“Yes,” Wei Wuxian answered, “Only this way can we grow the crops well.”**

**Fourth Uncle nodded and went back to work.**

They were actually farming.

Jin Zixuan shouldn't be so surprised. It just struck him that, at that very moment in time, he was also covered in mud, trying to build a lotus pond for A-Li. He got his robes and his face dirty so he could make Koi Tower feel like home for his beloved.

Now the Wen Remnants dug into the dirt to try and make a home for themselves.

It was humbling work. It was also a desperate hope. Growing anything was never a certainty. Transformation of any kind took time. It took patience. Even after he planted all he'd wanted to, he'd still worried. What if the lotuses died anyways? No amount of money or power could make life flourish where it did not want to.

With the way Wei Wuxian brought Wen Ning back, maybe he shouldn't be surprised they were so hopeful.

**Before Wei Wuxian could move, a child attached himself to his leg, "This."**

**"A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian put his hands on his hips, "Quit it."**

**"Speak!" The child demanded.**

**Wei Wuxian sighed, "Fine. Put your hands away." He took the stuffed animal and started making noises for it. The child smiled, and he gave it back, "Here. Go play with it." The child didn't leave, "A-Yuan, if you follow me this way, I will plant you in the field as a radish."**

**A-Yuan ran over to the dirt and sat in one of the tracks. Fourth Uncle laughed.**

**Wei Wuxian followed, "A-Yuan, you really want to be a radish. Fine! Then stay still. If you move, I won't plant you." He scooped some dirt into his hands and threw it on the child's lap, "There you go! I will plant a big radish today! After several days, many radishes will grow out!" The child assisted, "Then everyone can eat to their heart's content."**

**"But I'm not a radish," A-Yuan observed.**

**"He's precious," Lady Qin commented, "Did his parents..."**

**"No," Wen Qing answered, "His parents died."**

**"Who takes care of him?" Jiang Yanli wondered.**

**"We all do," Wen Qing wasn't sure how much to admit about A-Yuan. She wasn't sure what they were going to do with A-Yuan. Even if her people relocated to somewhere safer, it wouldn't give him the best life. He'd always be a Wen. While it was no longer a death sentence, it would only hold him back. Who would ever trust him as a healer?**

**They would only trust her because they were desperate and she was skilled. Such was the way of the world.**

A-Yuan was just at the age where he would remember them forever. She hoped he could forget the Burial Mounds, but their family? She didn't want to harm him by separating them.

A-Yuan went through too many tough transitions already. That he could smile and be silly was a miracle. What if the next transition was the one that broke him? What if he became sullen when he couldn't see his aunties and uncles all the time? What if that sullenness turned to resentment? A happy Wen child wasn't a threat, but an angry one?

"I'd be willing to adopt him," Jiang Wanyin offered, keeping his voice low.

"That wouldn't help," Wen Qing almost snapped back. He'd still be raised by her, and no one would forget she was a Wen. They'd also be suspicious if that made A-Yuan the heir to a great Sect.

They'd always known they'd have to send A-Yuan away one day. It was something she and Wei Wuxian pointedly did not talk about. She assumed they would give it a few years until A-Yuan was old enough to understand, then send him off to whatever Sect they thought would train him and hide him. They'd hope the hatred of the Wens would have died down some by then.

Honestly, they'd never planned anything beyond their immediate survival. A-Yuan growing up was more than she ever imagined.

**Wei Wuxian considered that, then corrected, "Then we will plant a child here. If we water the child, apply fertilizer to him, and let him enjoy the sun often, we can grow many children."**

**"I want three older brothers and two older sisters," A-Yuan decided.**

**"No problem," Wei Wuxian agreed, "We'll give A-Yuan three older brothers and two older sisters."**

**"Will they look like me or radishes?" A-Yuan wondered.**

**Wei Wuxian put his hands on his hips thoughtfully, "That's hard to say. Do you want them to look like you or the radishes?" He tossed more dirt.**

**"Wei Wuxian!" Wen Qing scolded, "What are you doing?"**

**"Qing-jie," A-Yuan explained as she came over, "We're trying to grow some older brothers and sisters here."**

**"A-Yuan," Wei Wuxian leaned down, "How about growing more aunts? If we grow more aunts, then we won't worry about the labor force."**

**A-Yuan clapped in agreement.**

The child really was precious.

His presence also indicated that Wei Wuxian would not go insane. Two people already proved they could pull Wei Wuxian out of the worst of the resentment. Jiang Yanli and Hanguang-Jun. In the absence of both of them, they expected to see Wei Wuxian become darker. They wouldn't blame him for letting the resentment win in such a hopeless place.

But there was a child. A child who smiled at him, who wasn't afraid to come up and grab him.

A child who was likely being taught by his remaining family that Wei Wuxian was a hero.

The rest of the world's children were being taught that the Yiling Patriarch was a villain, but not this child. They'd already seen that all it took was one person to keep Wei Wuxian sane.

**Wen Qing pulled him out of the dirt, "Get up. Come." She started to brush the dirt, then turned to the young man, "Wei Wuxian, I just left for a little while. How could you plant A-Yuan in the soil?"**

**Wei Wuxian stuck his tongue out.**

**"It's fine that you can't help with work, but how can you make trouble?" Wen Qing asked, "I have yet to wash his clothes from yesterday." She adjusted the child's robes, "You messed up his clothes again. What should he wear tomorrow? You should wash all his clothes today!"**

**Wei Wuxian's eyes widened, "Washing clothes is something other people do. How can a man like me do that divine job?"**

**Wen Qing held up two fingers, and Wei Wuxian's eyes widened more. She met his gaze, "Will you do it or not?"**

**He took a deep breath and smiled, "Fine."**

Jin Guangyao already knew from Hanguang-Jun that Wei Wuxian adopted this child sometime during their time in the Burial Mounds. Or took over most of his care to the point where it was like adoption. It wasn't like Wei Wuxian was a farmer.

Jin Guangyao also knew that of all the options before them, letting Hanguang-Jun claim the child would give him the best future.

The same couldn't be said of Wei Wuxian.

"He's really weak when he can't use resentment."

Jin Guangyao didn't catch who had said that, but from the low murmurs, Wen Qing's successful threat hadn't gone unnoticed. Wei Wuxian didn't have a golden core. Sure, he wasn't defenseless without it, but if he was also unwilling to use resentment?

Before the truth came out about him, everyone believed there were no situations where he wouldn't protect himself. Now they knew that was a lie.

It's a weakness Jin Guangyao would have found a way to exploit, if that were still his intention.

It might take others longer, but eventually they would find a way too. There would be those who were unhappy that Jin Guangshan was no longer in power. Even if they hadn't directly contributed to his crimes, they still benefited from the former status quo. They were too cowardly to make their discontent public and attack a stronger cultivator.

They would go after Wei Wuxian wherever he settled. He was either a monster to be feared or a weakling to be pitied. Too many people struggled with the idea of power being anything other than ruthlessness.

**Jiang Cheng approached the Burial Mounds alone. He came upon the barrier of talismans. He looked at it for a moment, but a quick hit from Zidian allowed him to enter. He continued down the path until he saw the people. His grip tightened on his sword, but all he saw was them working on the building.**

**"Potatoes," Wei Wuxian sat with Wen Qing.**

**"Radishes," Wen Qing replied.**

**"I dislike radishes. I want potatoes," Wei Wuxian insisted.**

**"Radishes grow well and won't wither easily," Wen Qing argued, "No potatoes. I said radishes, so we'll grow radishes."**

**"Wei-gongzi," Fourth Uncle interrupted, drawing their attention to their visitor.**

**Wei Wuxian rose with a small smile, while Wen Qing just froze. Wei Wuxian moved closer, "You're here, Jiang Cheng. Tell me, is it better to plant potatoes or radishes?" He reached down to grab his brother's arm, to draw him into the conversation.**

**Jiang Cheng didn't move.**

**Wen Qing stood.**

**Wei Wuxian let go of his arm, "What are you all looking at?" He pointed Chenqing, "Back to work." The Wen followed his suggestion.**

It wasn't what anyone was expecting.

If Nie Mingjue had gone, if this were Huaisang, there would be a lot more yelling.

It wasn't as though Wei Wuxian didn't understand what he did. If the dramatic confrontation with Wangji weren't evidence enough, he knew exactly what was going on outside the Burial Mounds. However, he was also a good leader. They'd all seen the signs of it when he was Head Disciple under Jiang Fengmian, and when they were trapped in the cave with the Xuanwu.

A good leader didn't show fear. Or if they did, they shared it with their people along with a way to push past their fear.

There was no end to this exile, so he could only pretend that it wasn't as serious as it was.

**“What are you doing?” Jiang Cheng asked.**

**“Can't you see it?” Wei Wuxian asked back, “We're building a house.”**

**“Building a house?” Jiang Cheng repeated, “Then while I was coming up, what were those diggers doing? Don't tell me that you want to grow food!”**

**“You already saw it,” Wei Wuxian said, “They are going to grow food there.”**

**“You want to grow food on a mountain of corpses,” Jiang Cheng reminded him, “Can they be edible?”**

**“Believe me, when people are extremely hungry, they will eat anything,” Wei Wuxian replied.**

When it came to survival, people would do anything.

Wasn't that the story of Wei Wuxian?

For his love, he took up a sword of Yin Iron. For his brother and Sect, he gave away his golden core. For the entirety of the cultivation world, he developed demonic cultivation. For the debt he owed a friend, he would reverse death.

All while smiling through whatever toll it exacted from him.

**“You really want to station yourself here in the long run,” Jiang Cheng sneered, “Can people really live in such a terrible place?”**

**Wei Wuxian looked away, “I once lived there for three months.” He glanced back.**

**Jiang Cheng looked away this time, “You're not returning to Lotus Pier?”**

**“Since Yunmeng and Yiling are close to each other, I can go back when I miss Yunmeng,” Wei Wuxian assured him.**

**“Stop daydreaming!” Jiang Cheng snapped.**

Of course Wei Wuxian revealed the truth when it wouldn't be believed.

It was the same thing he did with Wangji. His younger brother wanted to know more about the Amulet, so Wei Wuxian revealed he'd survived the Burial Mounds. Jiang Wanyin was demanding answers about his plans for the future, so Wei Wuxian just dropped the information when he knew he wouldn't be distracted from his original purpose.

The easiest way to beat false ambivalence was with true sincerity.

Lan Xichen didn't think many would be able to muster that. Much less Jiang Wanyin.

**Before he could continue, A-Yuan latched onto his leg. He looked down, "Where is this child from? Get off of me!"**

**"Ay," Wei Wuxian warned, "Get off? Can you use the words correctly?" He looked down, "A-Yuan, how can you just hold the leg of whoever you see?" The child just sucked on his fingers. Wei Wuxian bent down, "Don't put your hand in your mouth, you just touched the soil! Do you know what kind of soil that is? Come here."**

**Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes as Wei Wuxian fussed over the child.**

**"Where's Popo?" Wei Wuxian asked.**

**The old woman called out, "A-Yuan. Come here."**

**"Go to Popo," Wei Wuxian gave him a little shove, "Run slowly!" He smiled when the child sat in the old woman's lap.**

It was getting harder to tell when Wei Wuxian was acting.

MianMian was certain this was a false front he was putting up because they were in front of the Wen Remnants. However, she was also certain that his fussing over the child was genuine. She hadn't seen him interact with children this small before, but it had been obvious he was well loved by even the youngest shidi back in Lotus Pier.

Granted, Wei Wuxian had been acting in Lotus Pier too. His whole life really.

He acted like Madam Yu's words didn't hurt him so they would hurt his siblings less. He acted like he was just running off so he could keep Lan secrets. Even before they were thrust into adulthood and war, he was constantly hiding his pain to keep others at ease.

It was just who he was at this point. Did that make any of it an act?

Did it make everything an act? What did Wei Wuxian want to do with his life? All they'd seen him do was react and settle.

**Jiang Cheng scoffed, "Those Sect Leaders thought that you had gathered a group of rebels to throne yourself on the mountain, waving some flags." He shook his head, "They turn out to be a group of the old, young, and weak. All useless!"**

**Wei Wuxian turned to him, "All useless? Can't you speak in a good manner?"**

**Jiang Cheng looked scolded, then changed subjects, "Where's Wen Ning?"**

**"Why did you ask for him suddenly?" Wei Wuxian replied.**

**"Many people came to me to ask about him," Jiang Cheng informed him, "Who can I turn to when they come to me? I can only come to you."**

**Wei Wuxian smiled softly, then nodded and led him towards a cave.**

This wasn't the fight they'd heard about.

They were told that Jiang Wanyin emerged from the Burial Mounds with a broken arm and blood on his sword that didn't belong to him.

Another lie?

The two brothers didn't seem at such odds. They couldn't see this becoming a fight. Not with a child nearby who embraced Jiang Wanyin with a smile. Not with the Sect Leader seeing for himself that there was no army, just a bunch of people trying to make a home in the only place safe for them.

Was their fight staged? Was that why Jiang Wanyin didn't need to be convinced that Wei Wuxian did none of the crimes he was accused of?

**Wen Qing intercepted them, throwing her arms out to block the way, "What do you want to do?"**

**"Don't worry," Wei Wuxian assured her, "Jiang Cheng came here to see an old friend. He won't do anything to him."**

**Jiang Cheng looked anywhere but at Wen Qing.**

**Wen Qing lowered her arms, "He just calmed down. Don't disturb him."**

**"I know," Wei Wuxian nodded.**

**Wen Qing hesitated, "After entering, don't make any noises."**

**Wei Wuxian smiled slightly, "Fine."**

**Jiang Cheng finally made eye contact with Wen Qing, and she stepped aside.**

Jin Zixuan grimaced. He had almost forgotten that this wasn't just Jiang Wanyin having to go and confront his brother. He was also facing the woman who could have been his wife, if circumstances had just been a little different.

He thought it was remarkable that A-Li ever forgave him for his mistakes.

He was more surprised when Wen Qing let him through. It was easy to trust Jiang Wanyin, the Sect Heir who was more worried for his brother than anything else. It was harder to trust Sect Leader Jiang, who had every reason to scorn her. That he was there and didn't support them immediately...what did that say to her about his character?

Surely some part of her had to resent him. Even if there wasn't much he could have done to sway the world, and aiding them at all would have earned him the same condemnation, were they only going to be a marriage of duty?



Love was another transformation. It took time and patience, but it also had to be wanted.

**Wei Wuxian took a few steps forward, then turned back to Jiang Cheng, “Why are you still standing there? Let’s go.”**

**They entered the cave. It was littered with talismans and other objects. Wei Wuxian made it about halfway across before freezing, “Hey! Don’t trample on it!” He picked an object up, “This is useful to me. It will be finished soon.” He dusted it off, then stopped Jiang Cheng again, “Don’t step on that. This is also useful. To be finished soon.”**

**Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, “You threw them all over the place. You can’t blame me.”**

**“I live here alone,” Wei Wuxian pointed out, “I feel like scattering them. So what? You really...” He set the items down on a boulder.**

**“You live in this place?” Jiang Cheng asked.**

**Wei Wuxian hummed.**

A cave. Why was it always a cave?

It was better than sleeping outside, Nie Huaisang would give him that. He had also already lived in a cave his first time in the Burial Mounds.

It also gave him the privacy he’d never had before to work on his inventions. He wasn’t allowed to experiment freely when Madam Yu was alive. While he fiddled around in Cloud Recesses, he was still restricted by the conventions of the time. Then he was struggling with the aftermath of the war when he returned, trying to go back to some semblance of normal.

At the Burial Mounds, no one cared what he was doing. Well, people did care, but they would never get it right so in a way it didn’t matter. The Wen Remnants wouldn’t be scared of him regardless of what he did. Wen Qing would remind him to eat and sleep, but other than that, Wei Wuxian now had the time to go wild.

It was good to see he was being productive.

Now he just needed to inventory it and see how they could profit.

**Wei Wuxian then led him to where Wen Ning was laid, “Wen Ning,” Wei Wuxian addressed, “Wen Ning. Someone came to see you.” He turned to Jiang Cheng, “He can hear us.”**

**“Why is he in this condition?” Jiang Cheng demanded, “People said the dead you resurrect became fierce corpses and kill people without hesitation.”**

**Wei Wuxian scoffed, “Resurrection? Where are the corpses I raised? Part of his spirit was snatched by the dancing fairy when he was a child. Hence, he was used as rare bait by those vicious men to attract evil. When we found him, he was corrupted by resentment. His pulse had stopped. He only had his last breath.”**

**“I just wanted to give the Jin Sect a lesson through Wen Ning,” Wei Wuxian continued, “By using the power of the Stygian Tiger Amulet. It didn’t come to me that...he would become a puppet and lose his mind.”**

**“Could he slaughter others just because he lost his mind?” Jiang Cheng demanded.**

**“Wen Ning was an introvert and a coward,” Wei Wuxian stayed calm, “He often hid his emotions. When he lost his mind, that pain, fury, anxiety, and uneasiness hidden in his heart all erupted out.”**

It was a strange observation.

It was often believed that it was those who were strongest in life who were strongest in death.

Lan Qiren had never fully believed in that. Yes, those who desperately clung to power in life were often those who desperately held onto power in death. However, there was fury in powerlessness. It was those who were forgotten who never got proper funeral rights. It was those with nothing that viewed death as an opportunity.

Those who hid what was broken never had the chance to heal, so they stayed broken.

**“Did your brother undergo a soul calming ceremony, Wen-guniang?” Lan Qiren asked.**

Wen Qing looked at him, then nodded, “He did, but his situation is complicated.”

It was supposed to be impossible for any who underwent the ceremony to become resentful spirits. But if he had learned anything from this, it was that Wei Wuxian could accomplish the impossible. It wasn’t as though many cultivators died in such a cruel fashion, but to know that there could be a resentful entity from a cultivator so wronged...

Surely his sister-in-law wasn’t so wronged in life then? Otherwise she would have lingered.

His mind kept going back to her and all the questions he’d never asked.

**“How is he now?” Jiang Cheng asked.**

**“Now,” Wei Wuxian answered, “I’m trying to call his consciousness back.”**

**“You are asking for the moon again,” Jiang Cheng snapped, “Can he count as human now? What’s his difference from the puppets we killed? Wei Wuxian...was that really you?”**

**Wei Wuxian turned to him, “Jiang Cheng, you suspect that I took the shard of Yin Iron too?”**

**“Even if he’s not a puppet,” Jiang Cheng avoided the question, “How can he be distinguished from all of them? You want to bring his consciousness back which is almost impossible.”**

**Wei Wuxian laughed, “Yes. I also think it’s difficult.” He turned away, “But I’ve boasted a dozen times to his sister. Every last one of them believes that I can save him. I have to do this favor or I’ll bring shame on myself.”**

**Jiang Cheng started to draw his sword, but Wei Wuxian stopped him with Chenqing.**

**“I’m sorry,” Jiang Wanyin apologized.**

**“I understand,” Wen Qing replied.**

He was angry at the situation, and there was one obvious, terrible solution. She understood that Jiang Wanyin wasn’t good at speaking directly to the heart of the problem. He would rather focus on the impossibility of saving the Wen Remnants first before addressing his own feelings of abandonment.

She couldn’t really blame him. They both wanted what was best for their brothers. With the world working against them, they both did things they regretted.

Saving Wei Wuxian cost her A-Ning once. She did try to get him to leave, but she knew the weight of the debt between them. Wei Wuxian couldn’t have let A-Ning stay as he was when his inaction contributed to that state.

**“You did something impossible to save Jiang Cheng,” Nie Huaisang commented, “Of course Wei Wuxian had to return the favor.”**

That was one way to look at it.

**Wei Wuxian pushed his sword back into his sheath, “What are you doing?”**

**“What am I doing?” Jiang Cheng snapped, “I’d like to ask you that. Wei Wuxian, how prestigious you are all this while.”**

**Wen Qing ran into the small room, “What are you two doing?”**

**Jiang Cheng lowered his blade.**

**“Wen Qing,” Wei Wuxian moved to her, “Please wait outside. Rest assured. I’m here.”**

**Wen Qing huffed, but left.**

**“Wei Wuxian, you’ve pushed me too hard,” Jiang Cheng started again, “These days, all major and minor Sects in Koi Tower are confronting me endlessly. They all want an account from me, so I had to come here.”**

**“What account?” Wei Wuxian asked, “This case has been closed. Those overseers got Wen Ning killed. Wen Ning killed them in return. Life for murder, money for debt. Let’s call that the end. They suppose Wen Ning is gone anyway.”**

Nie Mingjue marvelled once again at Wei Wuxian’s sense of justice.

Just viewing the memory of Qiongqi Pass tested his control over his rage. Part of him wanted to declare Wei Wuxian innocent of everything and move on to the actual villains in this story. What was bringing back someone who wrongfully died compared to the systematic slaughter of innocents? Was necromancy so terrible given the circumstances?

If only Wei Wuxian could be Chief Cultivator. If only he had the political power to back up his moral beliefs.

There were a few sighs of relief that Wei Wuxian wasn't stewing in the Burial Mounds, waiting for the moment to emerge and seek revenge. Cowards, all of them.

If Wei Wuxian went after those he viewed as responsible, it disgusted Nie Mingjue to think he would have faced him in battle before seeing this. Now, he was content that if Wei Wuxian acted, it would be for the right reasons.

**“Call that the end?” Jiang Cheng narrowed his eyes, “Impossible! Do you know how many eyes are spying on you and your Amulet? If they catch you in this situation, what is justified would be unjustified.”**

**“You’ve said it,” Wei Wuxian agreed, “What is justified would be unjustified. Where else can I go except to confine myself here?”**

**“Where? Of course there is somewhere,” Jiang Cheng disagreed, “The only way to mend this is to finish it ourselves before others take action.” He gestured to Wen Ning.**

**“What do you want me to do?” Wei Wuxian asked.**

**“Come back with me and turn in everybody here,” Jiang Cheng said.**

**Wei Wuxian scoffed, “Are you kidding? If I turn them in, the only ending is that they’ll be killed.”**

What is justified would be unjustified. What is right would be wrong. The rules of the world weren't the same for everybody.

Would they even have allowed Wei Wuxian to return if he gave up the remaining Wen? If he destroyed Wen Ning here, turned the rest back to Jin Guangshan and gave up the Amulet, would he have been left alone?

Lan Xichen knew they still weren't speaking directly about the issue. Jiang Wanyin wasn't so foolish as to think destroying Wen Ning would solve their problems. Back then, there was no way out for Wei Wuxian. The best he could do was exile himself, put himself in a prison he could not escape from before someone else did.

Neither brother wanted to admit there was nothing they could do to fix this.

Wei Wuxian was just letting Jiang Wanyin rant until he admitted it.

It was easier to blame a person than to blame the world. Even now, Lan Xichen thought things would be better as soon as Jin Guangshan was dealt with, as soon as each leader of the

Great Sects was someone who was a good person. Maybe things would get better, but they would still be far from ideal.

People were stubborn like that.

**“Having gone this far, you still care about the ending?” Jiang Cheng wondered.**

**“Jiang Cheng!” Wei Wuxian shouted, “Listen to what you just said. Take it back or I’ll beat you. Don’t forget who brought back the bodies of Jiang-shushu and Madam Yu, who sent back the remains buried in Lotus Pier!” He advanced, putting a hand on Jiang Cheng’s shoulder, “And who took us in when Wen Chao was hunting us down.”**

**“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng shouted back, “I’d really like to beat you up. True. They did save us. But why can’t you understand? Survivors of the Wen Sect are the target of public hatred. Those with the surname Wen are of the most heinous guilt. As for those who defend them, they are going against almost everyone in the world.”**

**“Everyone resents the Wen Sect,” Jiang Cheng shook his head, “And hope they have the most miserable ending. Defenders of the Wen Sect are opposing the mainstream. No one will speak for them. No one, in particular, will speak for you.”**

Lan Wangji lowered his gaze.

He wanted to be angry. He wanted to glare at Jiang Wanyin for his words, at his lack of understanding of who Wei Ying was. He wanted everyone in the room to remember that they contributed to this situation, to these brothers forced to argue over what should be basic morality.

They were cultivators. They existed to deal with demonic entities. They were to settle ghosts and kill monsters.

Why did they judge the living so much when their purview was the dead?

He let out his breath slowly. This would never be something he dealt with. As long as he was Hanguang-Jun he would be given leeway by the rest of the world. His uncle and his brother were the only ones who would see his faults where others saw perfection.

If he’d been faster, he could have helped liberate the Wen Remnants. He could have either killed the guards himself or incapacitated them for questioning. He could have been a witness to their crimes rather than just a witness to Wei Ying leaving.

If he’d been smarter, he would have realized all Wei Ying’s current misfortunes were a deliberate attack from the Jin Sect.

It was easy to get caught up in blaming others, but he reminded himself that everyone had room to improve. Just because he was Hanguang-Jun, just because he was right about Wei Ying, didn’t mean he would always be right about everything.

**“I don’t need anyone to speak for me,” Wei Wuxian dismissed.**

**“What on earth are you insisting on?” Jiang Cheng asked, “If you can’t do it, just step aside. I’ll do it.” He pulled his sword.**

**Wei Wuxian held the blade. It cut into his hand easily, but he didn’t let go, not even when his blood started dripping.**

**Jiang Cheng shoved him away and activated Zidian when Wei Wuxian took his sword with him. Before he could strike Wen Ning, he hesitated, and turned the attack on the wall.**

**“You’re a better person than you think, Jiang-xiong,” Nie Huaisang whispered.**

If it were him, he would have done it. If someone was holding his brother back, keeping them apart...well, he wouldn’t have struck in front of his brother, but he would have struck. Tampered with the talismans, messed around with Wei Wuxian’s experiments until something exploded...

**“I still...” Jiang Cheng trailed off.**

He still raised his arm to hurt his benefactor.

**“But you didn’t,” Nie Huaisang shrugged.**

Which really mattered more here. Jiang Cheng always compared himself to Wei Wuxian, an impossible standard. At least he went to the Burial Mounds himself to ask questions. At least he didn’t just assume Wei Wuxian went crazy, and all the Wens were evil. At least he turned his attack towards the wall rather than Wen Ning.

A lot of people would have done worse. A lot of people did do worse.

**“Wei Wuxian, do you understand that?” His voice broke as he turned away, “In the eyes of the four Major Sects, you’re a genius, a rare swordsman, a defiant hero, and the only one of your kind. But once you’re out of tune with them, you become outrageously frenzied, ignorant of ethics, and wicked as demons.”**

**Jiang Cheng turned to face Wei Wuxian, “You thought you could be independent. You thought you could travel and live without restraints.” Jiang Cheng shook his head, “There’s no such precedent.”**

**“No precedent?” Wei Wuxian snapped, “I’ll be the precedent.”**

**“Wei Wuxian, can’t you see the situation?” Jiang Cheng begged, “Do you have to make me say it out loud? If you persist in defending them, I won’t be able to defend you!” Tears came to his eyes.**

There it was.

The truth, spoken aloud and needing to be addressed.

Jiang Wanyin did care about the Wen Remnants. By not following through on his threat to Wen Ning, he showed that he internally sided with Wei Wuxian. Even he couldn't strike down the innocent. He cared about the opinion of the cultivation world, and how it would impact the Sect he was the leader of.

But all that was secondary to his inability to protect his brother.

Jiang Wanyin once sacrificed his life for Wei Wuxian.

Jin Zixuan would never forget that. It didn't result in his death, but only because Wen Chao was idiotic and cruel. To see Jiang Wanyin reduced to tears again, helpless against forces beyond his control, it truly drove how the Jin Sect replaced the Wen Sect in all ways.

No more.

**Wei Wuxian let out a deep breath, some of the tension leaving him, "Unable to defend me? Just leave me then."**

**Jiang Cheng swallowed.**

**Wei Wuxian turned away, "Leave me. Tell the world I defected. From now on, everything I do," He adjusted his grip on Sandu and turned back, "Doesn't concern the YunmengJiang." He thrust the blade between them to return it.**

**Jiang Cheng took his sword back, "Wei Wuxian, tell me. What are you doing this for?"**

**Wei Wuxian laughed, "Jiang Cheng, I will tell you honestly. Even if it weren't for Wen Qing and her brother, or for anyone else, I'd make the exact same choice."**

**Jiang Cheng laughed this time, "Wei Wuxian, are you addicted to playing the hero? You'll die if you can't be prominent?" He shook his head, "My mom was right. You are the troublemaker of our Sect. You do things you shouldn't be doing. You know the discipline of the Jiang Sect, right? You know it better than me. You all do!"**

**"A-Cheng," Jiang Yanli murmured.**

Her brother didn't understand. He wasn't as selfless as A-Xian. He protected their family and their Sect. He did the right thing, but only when doing so wouldn't impact those he believed were his responsibility. If a matter wasn't his business, then it wasn't his business.

It was the way many people went about their lives.

A-Xian was a hero because he didn't see the world that way. There wasn't just his duty and responsibilities. He couldn't ignore injustice.

It was what made him a hero.

It was also what brought him so much suffering. He wouldn't be A-Xian if he wasn't kind. She was so proud that he was such a kind person. But a part of her wished he had some of the rest of the world's selfishness. Just enough so he would stop acting as a shield for others.

Hopefully others learned to be more like A-Xian, so that he wasn't the only shield in the world.

**Jiang Cheng sheathed his sword, "Let's decide when to fight then."**

**A tear rolled down Wei Wuxian's face as Jiang Cheng moved past him to leave.**

**Wen Qing intercepted him at the entrance to the Burial Mounds.**

**"If you're here to persuade me," Jiang Cheng didn't look at her, "Please don't even start."**

It was the same words she said to him when he tried to prevent her from returning to Qishan.

The words carried the same weight. All anyone had to do was ask.

If Wei Wuxian had asked Hanguang-Jun to go with him with the Wen Remnants, then they would be together.

If Hanguang-Jun had made himself clear why he wanted Wei Wuxian to return to Gusu with him, then they could have been together.

If Jiang Wanyin asked, all that time ago before the Sunshot Campaign, maybe Wen Qing would never have been mistaken for the enemy. They would be together.

Similarly with if Wen Qing had asked Jiang Wanyin for help.

But no one here was telepathic. They couldn't read each other's minds. Even if they could guess, the act of putting thought to words was what they wanted. In the end, it didn't matter what the others wanted. It mattered what they did.

As tragic as it was, they'd never know how matters would have changed if one of them just asked.

**Wen Qing reached into her robes and pulled out the comb, "Jiang-gongzi...this comb." She held it between them, "I'm afraid I can't have it after all."**

**His gaze darted to her eyes, and he fought back a frown as he took the gift back. He swallowed and clenched his fist, "At that time, why didn't you bring it to Lanling and find me?"**

**"At that time, if I had met you first in Lanling, would you have taken me to rescue A-Ning despite everything else?" Wen Qing asked.**

**He didn't answer, so she moved past him. She didn't notice he started crying.**

Jin Guangyao glanced at the couple now.

That was the last time they saw each other before she was brought to the Tower?



Wen Qing whispered what looked like an apology, but Jiang Wanyin waved it away.

It was a wonder Jiang Wanyin didn't hate Wei Wuxian. His entire life he was compared to Wei Wuxian. His father always appeared to favor him. His mother made him feel like his skills were nothing to Wei Wuxian's. Even his friends...surely he doubted whether they were there for him or for Wei Wuxian.

This all looked like someone else was picking Wei Wuxian over Jiang Wanyin.

The better man.

Not that Jin Guangyao had any right to judge who was better. They were both still terribly noble in his books. If they were more like the majority of the world, then they wouldn't have ended up in this situation at all.

**When Wen Qing went back, she sat with her people as they ate.**

**"Popo I want more," A-Yuan complained, "I'm hungry."**

**"Be good, A-Yuan," The old woman soothed, "When it's dawn, I'll take you to pick fruit."**

**"I'm hungry," The child repeated.**

**Wen Qing held out her piece of fruit, "Here, A-Yuan. Take this."**

**"A-Qing, are you not feeling good today?" The old woman asked, "You didn't eat a bit. You should keep it for yourself."**

**Wen Qing shook her head, "I'm fine. A-Yuan is still a child."**

**Wei Wuxian hesitated, then came closer, "Yeah, A-Yuan has to eat a lot." He held out more fruit, "These are for A-Yuan."**

**"Good, it's from Xian-gege," Popo held it up to his mouth.**

**"Fourth Uncle, distribute the rest to everyone please," Wei Wuxian handed out more, then cleaned his hands, "When crops can be raised here, we can stop catching fish and picking fruit. And A-Yuan..." He turned towards the child and made a face, "Can be full every day."**

**"Right."**

**"It's unexpected that in such a wild area we can grow some real food," Fourth Uncle commented.**

**"We can go down the mountain to buy some seeds," Another Wen member offered, "Grow some vegetables."**

**"Down the mountain? Can we do that?"**

**“Wait a while longer, I think,” Another advised, “Wait until the rumors die down.”**

“Have you been starving?” Jiang Wanyin asked.

“We’ve managed,” Wen Qing answered.

Qin Su didn’t like the sound of that. The doctor herself was a strong enough cultivator to be able to go without food for some time, but everyone else? Even Wei Wuxian, without his golden core, didn’t have anything reinforcing his body. Unless resentment made him more durable, but that came with its own price.

“And the child?” Zewu-Jun inquired.

Wen Qing bristled, “A-Yuan is as healthy as can be expected.”

At what cost to the rest of them?

The Wen Remnants had suffered so much. That they could settle down and plan for a future somewhere safe was incredible. That the safe place was the Burial Mounds...she wondered if Wei Wuxian’s initial survival had changed something there. If Wei Wuxian could make the Burial Mounds habitable, and sustainable if they weren’t starving by now, then what of other forsaken places?

“As can be expected,” Zewu-Jun frowned slightly, “Will it affect his growth?” His frown deepened, “What if there was an illness?”

“What do you want me to say? Is everyone finally willing to believe that we didn’t have a plan?” Wen Qing snapped, “We went there to survive, and survive we did. Wei Wuxian and I would have died before we let anything threaten that survival, be it starvation, illness, or attack.”

If they couldn’t survive there, then they may as well face the danger of the outside world.

“We’d be fools not to believe you at this point,” Chifeng-Zun said.

They really would be. Sadly, there were many fools amongst them.

**Wen Qing stood and went back into the cave.**

**Wei Wuxian made to follow her, but was waylaid by A-Yuan. The boy hugged his leg, “Popo said this one is sweet.” He held up a fruit, “You eat it.”**

**Wei Wuxian patted his head and accepted it. Then the boy ran off and he went into the cave himself. He tossed the fruit up and down, “I don’t know the reason, but the fruits today taste especially sweet.” He drawled, then held the apple in front of her face, “Want to take a bite?”**

**When she didn’t move, he continued talking, “As young as A-Yuan is, he can eat so much. All the fruits today were almost eaten up.” Wen Qing still didn’t move, “This is**

**the last one.” He held it out again, “You really don’t want it?” She silently shook her head, “Well.” He tossed it again.**

**“Wei Wuxian,” Wen Qing said, “You should go.”**

**“Go?” Wei Wuxian echoed, “Go where?”**

**“Where you came,” Wen Qing elaborated, though Wei Wuxian only fiddled with the fruit, “I’m actually quite content with the situation now. As long as A-Ning is by my side, that would be enough. You don’t have to bother yourself for him anymore. Whether he wakes depends on him. We’ve almost settled down here. I’ll take care of the rest.”**

**“You are from the Jiang Sect after all,” She continued, “Not like us. Wei Wuxian, please go.”**

A way out.

Wen Qing actually offered Wei Wuxian a way out. He’d done as she asked. He found Wen Qionglin. He freed what was left of her people and brought them somewhere they wouldn’t be bothered.

He’d done all she’d asked of him, and didn’t expect him to pull off the impossible for her brother.

If only it hadn’t been too late for him.

Nie Mingjue gave up trying to figure out what Xichen wanted with the Wen child. Did he want Wen Qing to admit that the Burial Mounds were no place for a kid? It was obvious, and just cruel to force the issue. If all went well, the child would have a good home soon, with the protection and good will of the people in the world that mattered.

The child would learn, in time, to ignore those that didn’t matter.

As long as he kept his head up and didn’t go down a dark path, he would be alright.

**Wei Wuxian took a bite of the fruit.**

**Wen Qing turned to him, incredulous, “You...”**

**“What?” Wei Wuxian asked, “You said you didn’t want it.”**

**“Wei Wuxian!” Wen Qing stood.**

**“What’s wrong?” Wei Wuxian complained, “I’ll give it to you. I’ll give it to you.” He wiped the fruit off on his sleeve, “Here.”**

**Wen Qing huffed and stormed away, “Eat it and die then.”**

**“Wen Qing,” Wen Wuxian called after her, “I’ve said it. I’ll bring Wen Ning back to normal. I’ll definitely achieve it.”**

And he did.

Wen Ning became the Ghost General. Though the general of what was now in serious doubt.

There was no Wen army. There were just farmers.

So if he wasn’t a general, and he wasn’t another of Wei Wuxian’s weapons, then what was he? There were rumors, of course. There were always rumors. Some said Wei Wuxian could be seen on the streets of Yiling, accompanied by a shy, quiet man who wore a strange necklace and had strange marks on his skin.

Could he just be a normal person?

A dangerous, powerful person who was just as much at risk of snapping as Wei Wuxian was...

But no more dangerous than many other cultivators, surely. Wen Ning also didn’t seek power. What he was now was a matter of survival, not desire.

**Wen Qing nodded, then continued leaving. She laid out on her own bed in a different place, but sleep evaded her. She went to check on Wen Ning, who was still asleep. The resentment within him stirred, and she touched his hand gently, “A-Ning. Our encounter with Wei Wuxian...was it fortune or misfortune?”**

**“Jie,” Wen Ning called softly, “It hurts.”**

**“A-Ning,” She held on tighter.**

**“A-Jie, it hurts,” Wen Ning repeated.**

**“A-Ning,” Her hands moved to his shoulders, “A-Ning. Jie is here. Don’t be afraid. Jie is here. A-Ning.” She repeated that mantra as he continued to moan.**

**Then she heard a flute playing Rest, and Wen Ning settled.**

Lan Wangji let go of a little more of his rage.

He was still angry, but it was now tempered by the relief that Wei Ying would soon be cleared of all the charges against him. Even here, where he was bringing someone back from unspeakable harm, he was shown using traditional cultivation in addition to his new techniques.

It wasn’t some unholy ritual that only brought back the darkest parts of Wen Ning.

Just as it wasn’t Wei Wuxian there when Wen Ning came back to consciousness.

It was both of them.

“That poor boy,” Xichen whispered, “Do you think he still suffers?”

Lan Wangji turned to him, “He would not leave his people now.”

Where Wen Qing went, so would her brother. He wasn’t someone to be experimented on or a monster to be hunted. He was a person.

“What about when his people are gone?” His brother whispered, “What then?”

Lan Wangji didn’t know. He wasn’t sure what he would do if he had no one left in the world.

**The next day, Wei Wuxian went out to face Jiang Cheng.**

**Without a word, Jiang Cheng drew his sword and attacked. Wei Wuxian skillfully dodged each attack, before sending out talismans. Jiang Cheng avoided those. Wei Wuxian moved up to higher, uneven ground, sending talismans down as he evaded Jiang Cheng.**

**When he created enough distance, he pulled Chenqing and shielded himself with resentment. It was enough to block Jiang Cheng’s attack and force him back. They both regrouped on separate pillars.**

Jiang Wanyin didn’t use Zidian.

Was he not taking this fight as seriously as his expression suggested? Or could he just not bear to use his mother’s weapon against his brother after what happened at Lotus Pier?

This was another moment that clarified just how much life had changed for these young people.

Madam Yu had beaten Wei Wuxian because he’d angered the Wen Sect, and thus brought trouble to the Jiang Sect. Now, Jiang Wanyin was fighting with him because he’d saved the remaining Wen Sect, thus bringing trouble to the Jiang Sect.

Both times Wei Wuxian had done the right thing. Both times he was bearing an unjust punishment for them.

Still, Jiang Wanyin fought with his sword. Wei Wuxian wasn’t fighting at full power either, but even for appearances sake, Jiang Wanyin wouldn’t be exactly like his mother.

**Then they came together again, Jiang Cheng’s sword piercing into Wei Wuxian’s abdomen. Wei Wuxian’s attack also landed.**

**“Jiang Cheng,” Wei Wuxian complained, “Did you seriously need to be this harsh?”**

**Jiang Cheng coughed up blood.**

**Wei Wuxian sank down slightly, using Chenqing to keep himself upright.**

**Jiang Cheng sheathed his sword, clutching at his broken arm. Without a word, or even a glance back, he left.**

**Wei Wuxian watched him go.**

“You stabbed him?” Hanguang-Jun demanded.

Jiang Cheng flinched. It wasn’t that he forgot he stabbed his brother. It was just another thing he didn’t think about.

“That could have been fatal since he doesn’t have a golden core,” Lady Luo commented.

“He had me,” Wen Qing came to his defense.

“It wasn’t what we agreed on,” Jiang Cheng clenched his hands into fists. They’d never discussed it, but they both knew what needed to come from this.

They needed to fight. They needed to let out enough power that those watching or close by could feel the severity of the fight. Jiang Wanyin needed to be injured. No one would have believed they fought if Jiang Wanyin wasn’t injured. He needed to look angry, which was easy, but he shouldn’t have lost control of his temper and gone to injure Wei Wuxian.

It didn’t matter that he didn’t know about his lack of golden core and his consequential slower healing.

He shouldn’t have done it.

**The Jiang Sect disciples waited worriedly further away. Jiang Cheng pushed aside their worry, “Pass my words to all cultivation Sects. Wei Wuxian defected and rebels against all Sects. He’s been banished from the YunmengJiang.”**

**The disciples exchanged looks, “Zongzhu, that shixiong-”**

**Another stopped him.**

**“From now on, Wei Wuxian and the YunmengJiang will never be associated again,” Jiang Cheng declared dramatically, leaving his cloak behind.**

“So dramatic,” Nie Huaisang said.

Jiang Cheng did what Wei Wuxian asked him to. He abandoned him publicly. Wei Wuxian took advantage of Jiang Cheng’s anger to get him to agree to something he would regret. Just as the other Sects manipulated Jiang Cheng into going to the Burial Mounds so quickly.

Their confrontation at the Burial Mounds, and Wei Wuxian’s dramatic banishment drew all remaining attention away from Qiongqi Pass.

Another masterfully pulled off play by San-ge. Take away Wei Wuxian’s fiercest protection in the cultivation world while also taking heat off his own Sect. He’d forgotten just how

quickly this all went by. From Phoenix Mountain, to Qiongqi, to the two brother's fight...it all felt more spread out in his memories.

So much happened in so little time, of course they ended up missing key details.

**Wei Wuxian stumbled back to the Wen camp with a bag. He found Wen Qing in the former palace, "Oh good. You're here." He smiled, "I've brought the potatoes back." He sat down, one hand pressed to his wound, "Tell everyone to put them in the ground tomorrow."**

**Wen Qing stared at him, and his cheer faded, "Don't look at me like that. I've already bought them. It's about time to give up on your turnips. Oh, right. I've also bought some meat. Start cooking now. Everyone can get to taste meat tonight."**

**She wasn't distracted. She reached down and grabbed his wrist.**

**"Oi!" Wei Wuxian drew back immediately, "What are you doing? Men and women shouldn't be improperly intimate. You suddenly doing this makes me scared."**

**Wen Qing turned away, unimpressed.**

MianMian scoffed.

Whoever ended up living with Wei Wuxian after this had better strip search him every day.

It was unbelievable what injuries he was capable of just walking off. He walked away from Madam Yu's whipping. He walked away from his golden core being removed. He walked out of the Burial Mounds and into a war. Now, he went and bought potatoes after being stabbed by his brother and disavowed from his Sect.

Granted, he may have bought the potatoes beforehand, but it was still an unnecessary burden on his injuries.

"I almost wish he would collapse," Qin Su said.

Like he did after the Xuanwu, and after the battle at Nightless City. Wei Wuxian wasn't invulnerable, and he shouldn't act like it.

**"Alright, alright," Wei Wuxian tapped his nose, "I know you want to heal my wound, but I'm really fine." He spread his hands, "See?" He pretended to be fine, but couldn't hold in one pained gasp. He then pressed on his wound, lowering his voice "But if you keep delaying your cooking like this, I might not be fine then."**

**Wen Qing's eyes widened, but Wei Wuxian only whined, "I'd starve." He then smiled.**

**Wen Qing picked up the bag of potatoes and stormed off, "Where are you going?" Wei Wuxian called after her.**

**"To exchange them for radishes," She replied over her shoulder.**

Jiang Yanli closed her eyes.

The Burial Mounds weren't good, but they weren't as bad as she feared. She had been scared that it would be a repeat of his first time there. Even if he made it better for the Wen Remnants, returning to a place that had left him so much trauma couldn't be easy. She feared he would suffer flashbacks, or become withdrawn without someone he truly trusted.

"Thank you, Wen Qing," Jiang Yanli opened her eyes to look at her, "For taking care of him when I could not."

"He's like family to me now," Wen Qing admitted, "What he's done for us..."

It was more than anyone else would do for anyone less than family.

**Back at Koi Tower, Jiang Yanli emerged from her rooms to find a Lotus pond waiting for her in the courtyard.**

**"Haven't I said it?" Jin Zixuan called out, "No entry for anyone."**

**She moved towards his voice, and found him in the mud planting more, "Jin-gongzi." He froze, then turned towards her, "You can come out first."**

**"Okay," Jin Zixuan brought the lotus flower in front of him, then bowed and tried to hide it again.**

**"I didn't mean to intrude," Jiang Yanli apologized, "Sorry."**

**Jin Zixuan was still frozen.**

**"Madam Jin called me here," Jiang Yanli continued.**

**"Oh," Jin Zixuan finally spoke again, "No problem."**

**Jiang Yanli turned to walk over the bridge, admiring the lotuses as she passed, "I'd really like to go back to Lotus Pier." She turned back to him, "Jin-gongzi. Excuse me."**

**"Jiang-guniang," Jin Zixuan raised his voice, "I know this is not Lotus Pier. But...But I'm willing to build another Lotus Cove for you." He joined her on the bridge as she held back tears, "Jiang-guniang."**

**"A-Xuan," She turned back towards him, smiling.**

The proposal was bittersweet in hindsight.

The three siblings from Lotus Pier once swore to always be together. Yet this was the moment of their true separation, the one that would have lasted if not for the intervention of this viewing.

Wei Wuxian, exiled to the Burial Mounds through no fault of his own.



Jiang Wanyin, forced to keep appearances as Sect Leader and abandon his brother.

Jiang Yanli, finally able to marry the love of her life, but that meant leaving her home and brothers as well.

Just another wrongdoing to add to the ever growing list of failures.

## Chapter End Notes

A couple of important things, so just bear with me.

### 1) Translations

I am fine with anyone translating this into any language. All I ask is that you leave a link in the comments so I can add it to the summary. I also ask that you try to avoid repeats on sites. I just don't want anyone to get in trouble.

Right now, the only translation I know of is into Spanish on Wattpad. If you want to reach out to them to collab or see if it's alright to do another, I would appreciate it. I'm not sure what the proper etiquette is.

I also ask that no one do anything with this for profit, but I'm relatively certain that no one's making money off of this.

### 2) My Absence

Thank you for your concern about my absence. I had a number of difficulties in my life, and while they are not all resolved I did finally manage to finish this chapter and post it. I will let you know if I decide to not finish this. Otherwise, I ask that people please not ask me questions unrelated to the fic. I'm fine with sharing some personal information about myself here, but not a lot, and rarely serious details.

I know that may sound like an overreaction to people asking if I'm okay, but it's an impossible question to answer. If I say I am, then it looks like I'm lazy for not writing. If I say I'm not, and just leave it at that, it seems cold. Since I'm not willing to expand on the details, I usually settle for just not answering and feeling guilty about ignoring it.

If you can't tell from this fic, I have a bad habit of overanalyzing.

### 3) Happy Holidays!

Thank you for your continued support!

# Siblings Reunited

## Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for discussions of canon/fanon rape and sexual assault. Also an off screen suicide.

I know most authors put the trigger warnings at the end of a chapter to prevent spoilers, but I struggled writing this so I want to give the warning early for anyone who may struggle reading it.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Nie Huaisang tapped his fingers on his knee, “Wen Qing, when does Wen Ning wake up?”

“When Hanguang-Jun visited,” Wen Qing answered.

“He visited?” Da-ge asked.

Of course he did, and of course Wen Ning woke up at that visit. While Wei Wuxian was capable of many impossible things alone, there was the element of destiny when he was with Hanguang-Jun.

Nie Huaisang couldn’t wait for this to be over, but something was making him anxious. Something he couldn’t quite place. It was like he was missing something.

**Lan Wangji sat in a teahouse.**

**“The Yiling Patriarch is a scourge,” An old man lectured to a crowd of listeners, “Who wouldn’t say so?”**

**“Tell you what. The ancestral grave of the family of my next door neighbor’s big aunt was dug up recently,” Another man spoke up.**

That was what, third-hand information? Fourth-hand?

If it were anyone else, it would be unreliable. If it were anyone else, it would have been dismissed.

Especially amongst cultivators. They should be able to differentiate between civilian hearsay and fact. What need did Wei Wuxian have of other corpses when he was living in a place with an untold amount of them? Why would he venture out of his safe place when he knew he would only find enemies?

They'd just been so certain that they were right. That certainty didn't last through the weeks of nothing. There was no news, which was good news for Wei Wuxian.

So people started making up bad news to justify their view of him. It didn't feel wrong to blame random misfortunes on him. For all they knew at the time, he could have been involved in them. Then again, they were just declaring him guilty without investigation, allowing an unknown amount of crimes to not even be looked at.

Maybe those graves were really robbed. It was far too late to begin an investigation.

**Lan Wangji poured his tea, trying to ignore them.**

**"It must have been him!"**

**"Listen to him!"**

**Lan Wangji drank.**

**"I have to say that I heard he is making puppets using corpses."**

**Lan Wangji froze.**

**"How horrifying!"**

**"At Qiongqi Pass, he even turned a living person into a puppet which led to a dozen deaths. That puppet was a survivor of the Wen Sect. Since then, people call him the Ghost General." People whispered to each other, "But after Qiongqi, his whereabouts are unknown."**

**"Where else could he be? He must be doing evil along with the Yiling Patriarch."**

How had anyone ever believed this?

How had Lan Qiren believed this?

It was all nonsensical fear mongering. He could recognize that now. Certain powers wanted the world to fear Wei Wuxian. They wanted to keep everyone against the Wen Sect.

He shook his head. That was no longer his greatest concern. Wangji's trip to Yiling and his resulting punishment for it would be on display soon. It would be his nephew's way of showing his dedication to Wei Wuxian, while also explaining why he didn't go to Yiling again. It would once again raise questions about the Lan Sect.

Lady Jiang's ire was what he was worried about. She was kind, unfathomably kind in the same way Xichen was. She wouldn't cast judgment, but seek to understand. Perhaps her kindness would last long enough for them to give her an explanation in private.

Lan Qiren wasn't going to depend on that. With all they've seen, no one would fault Lady Jiang for less than charitable behavior.

What explanation could he give her? He had come to realize he didn't know anything about his brother's marriage. There must be a reason his sister-in-law killed their teacher. One she didn't think would grant her freedom, so she was imprisoned without trying to defend herself.

Did his brother know the reason? Or was he like Wangji, certain there must be a reason even if they never figured it out?

**The storyteller waved his fan around, "You people just know the half of it. The Yiling Patriarch's terrifying abilities are more than making puppets. His dirty tricks were nothing but horror. I'm telling you. He dug those bodies for cracking bones and sucking marrow to help enhance his wicked tricks."**

**"If the YunmengJiang hadn't adopted and cultivated him, Wei Wuxian would be a mediocre wandering the streets," The old man continued, "He defected and injured the young Jiang-zongzhu. Traitors like him should be killed if anyone would catch him."**

**"That's right!"**

**"Yeah!"**

**"That kind of person should be killed!"**

**"He deserves death!"**

**Lan Wangji slammed his tea cup onto the table, spilling the drink. He glared back at the crowd who had all turned to him. He put down his payment and quickly left.**

They would have killed him.

Jin Guangyao was certain of that. With the massive success of their plot to turn the world against him, Wei Wuxian would have been dead in a matter of months. They'd have killed him in a battle, and whatever was left of his belongings would have been divided as spoils of war.

It was all the more telling that the people of Yiling, the ones just outside of the Burial Mounds, were still so wrong about the Yiling Patriarch.

Still, deserved or not, death was death.

It was often those deserving of an early end that lived the longest.

**Before he got too far away from the teahouse, a child latched onto his leg. He looked down and found the smiling face of A-Yuan.**

"What?" Wen Qing frowned.

"Did..." Jiang Wanyin trailed off, "Did Wei Wuxian lose him?"

Wen Qing narrowed her eyes.

“Don’t you know what this means?” Nie Huaisang asked, “This must be destiny!”

Jiang Wanyin sighed. Wen Qing just rubbed her head. It wasn’t that bad. No one in Yiling ever recognized the Yiling Patriarch. They certainly didn’t expect that the child running around on their own was part of the evil Wen Army hiding in the Burial Mounds. It was as safe for him in town as any other child, and if there was trouble...

Well, if there was any trouble Wei Wuxian would find his way to it in an instant.

She wasn’t happy that he lost A-Yuan, but if this was what led him to Hanguang-Jun?

“They’re soulmates,” Zewu-Jun added, “And this child...”

Was it meant to be? Was that why Zewu-Jun was invested in A-Yuan’s wellbeing? Did he think Wei Wuxian, and therefore Hanguang-Jun, was going to adopt him? Raise him in the Lan Sect?

It was something to bring up with Wei Wuxian later.

**Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian had realized he had lost the child. He ran through the streets, yelling, “A-Yuan!”**

**Soon enough, his attention was drawn to the small crowd surrounding Lan Wangji and a now crying A-Yuan. Wei Wuxian stared at him for a moment, listening.**

**“Such a little boy cries so loudly. Was he scolded by his dad?”**

**“How can the father-”**

**“I’m not,” Lan Wangji protested, obviously uncomfortable.**

Jin Zixuan snickered. He couldn’t help himself. After everything they faced, this was the only time Hanguang-Jun looked this scared without Wei Wuxian being in immediate danger.

A part of him sympathized. It was terrifying when his own child would cry and he didn’t know what it was he wanted. Jin Zixuan couldn’t feed him if he were hungry. He was grateful for the assistance of those around him, otherwise he’d probably do the same thing of standing around with a crying child clinging to him.

At least Hanguang-Jun didn’t kick him away. There were many who wouldn’t have stood there, especially once the situation called the attention of a crowd.

Embarrassment could easily lead to anger. Watching his own past mistakes made that very obvious. If this had happened to him, before his marriage, before he’d realized that he wasn’t as good as his Sect always told him he was, he might have pushed away the crying child. He would have left him before anyone could whisper about him having a bastard.

**“Listen everyone! You see? You must be his dad. Must be. Your noses look exactly the same. Don’t you agree? Everyone?”**

**“Right.”**

**“This man is so cold.”**

**Wei Wuxian coughed to hide his laughter.**

**“Look how the child is crying. Was he scolded by his dad?”**

**“He doesn’t even know to hug and comfort the child. Just leave him crying on the ground. How are you a father?”**

**“So young,” Another defended, “It must be your first time as a father, yes? I didn’t know anything like you back then. But I know everything now that my wife gave birth to a few more. Raising a child is a learning process.”**

MianMian didn’t bother trying to disguise her laughter.

She wasn’t sure what was funniest to her. The idea that Hanguang-Jun, who was intensely in love with Wei Wuxian, produced a child or that his distaste in talking to strangers only led to one token protest with all these assumptions. He didn’t even react when they started giving him advice.

Or maybe it was the absurdity of the child picking Hanguang-Jun out of a crowd and then proceeding to cry on him.

Hanguang-Jun was an exceptionally competent man, but there he stood, defeated by something as non-threatening as an upset child. Would it be Wei Wuxian doing the bulk of the child care if they decided to adopt? Or was it a reflection of how Hanguang-Jun was treated as a child.

Her laughter trailed off at the thought. She doubted Zewu-Jun would just let his brother cry without being comforted, but Zewu-Jun couldn’t always be there, and she couldn’t imagine Lan Qiren being affectionate. There was the lingering mystery of what happened to their parents, but this gave her a little more insight.

A person fell back on what they knew in uncertain times. If she had an upset child, she would try singing to them the way her mother had sung to her. That Hanguang-Jun did nothing was...telling.

**Wei Wuxian laughed openly as the crowd gave up on talking to Lan Wangji and bent down to ask A-Yuan, “Boy. Where is your mother?”**

**“Don’t cry now. Where is his mother?”**

**Wei Wuxian considered intervening, then raised his voice, “Lan Zhan!”**

**Their gazes locked as Wei Wuxian hurried up to him.**

**“Who is this guy?”**

**“I don’t know.”**

The people of Yiling couldn't even recognize the Yiling Patriarch.

Of course they couldn't recognize a persona that didn't exist.

**Wei Wuxian’s smile slipped as he remembered the crowd. He turned to them, “Please leave. Nothing to see now. Do what you were going to do.”**

**Wei Wuxian put his hands on his hips as the crowd dispersed, leaving the three of them in the middle of the street, “Lan Zhan. What a coincidence. Why did you come to Yiling?”**

**“Night hunt,” Lan Wangji answered, “Passing by.”**

**Wei Wuxian nodded.**

**Lan Wangji looked down at the child still clinging to him, then back up, “This child...”**

**“Oh,” Wei Wuxian knelt, then carefully removed A-Yuan from Lan Wangji’s leg. He took his hand in his own, “This child...I gave birth to him.”**

**Lan Wangji’s eyes widened, but Wei Wuxian’s laughter gave away his teasing.**

Jiang Cheng slapped his own forehead.

Why couldn’t Wei Wuxian just say things like a normal person? No. Of course not. He heard everyone ask about the mother and decided that was the role he fit. He couldn’t say he was helping raise the kid, or informally adopted him, or he was the father. He had to say something outrageous just to see Hanguang-Jun’s reaction.

It was only moderately comforting to see that this long in the Burial Mounds hadn’t changed that about him. It was hard to tell how Wei Wuxian was during his own visit, since he was so upset that A-Jie was getting married and he wouldn’t be able to go.

**“Do you think he could make a baby with demonic cultivation?” Nie Huaisang asked.**

Jiang Cheng just hit him.

But a few things did make more sense now. If Wei Wuxian claimed A-Yuan in front of Hanguang-Jun, and they were...whatever they were by Lan standards, was that why Zewu-Jun was looking at the kid like that?

**“If Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun get married, would you let them keep the kid?” Jiang Cheng asked.**

It was ultimately up to the Wen. The thought of Wei Wuxian having kids never occurred to him before. How could it when Wei Wuxian was such a child himself? It wasn’t a bad idea. Wei Wuxian was great with kids. He adored them, and children loved him right back.

Wen Qing considered his question, “Do you think it would be better for him?”

Better than with them at Lotus Pier?

“I can’t imagine Hanguang-Jun being paternal,” He answered, “But I also didn’t consider him a romantic.”

She hummed.

“A child raised by Hanguang-Jun and the Yiling Patriarch would have very little to fear,” Nie Huaisang mused.

“And a lot to live up to,” Jiang Cheng added.

But they weren’t the same as their parents. They wouldn’t leave their children to deal with their problems. They would always protect them. Their children wouldn’t have the opportunity to earn titles as they did. There would be no war, and no centuries old monsters preying on them at their weakest.

**“What did you do?” Wei Wuxian decided to ask, “Why is he crying?”**

**“I didn’t do anything,” Lan Wangji answered.**

**“Ah,” Wei Wuxian nodded, then pointed at him, “I got it. Lan Zhan, pretty as you look, you always look angry. This child is still young. He can’t tell beauty and ugliness, so once he saw your unfriendly face, he definitely would cry.”**

**A-Yuan burrowed into Wei Wuxian’s thigh. The older man patted his head, “Lan Zhan. Watch.” Then he knelt down, cupping the child’s face, “A-Yuan. Look, isn’t it pretty?” He pointed to a nearby toy vendor, who held up a grass butterfly.**

Distraction.

Jiang Yanli shook her head. She could have guessed that was his method of calming A-Yuan.

If something was upsetting him, just look away. Look at something pretty, something enjoyable, and just forget about the upset. Put more spice on food so that what’s underneath is palatable. Even if it was trash beneath the spice, all he would taste was the spice.

Until he didn’t have a sense of taste anymore.

If only desire was so easy to get rid of.

**A-Yuan nodded, so Wei Wuxian stood up, “Come.” And brought him closer.**

**They looked at the toys on display, “You like them? You really do?”**

**A-Yuan laughed.**

**“Mister, here,” Wei Wuxian handed it back, “Come on.”**



**A-Yuan's smile fell.**

**Lan Wangji, who had been watching, stopped him, "Wei Ying. Why didn't you buy it for him?"**

**"Why should I?" Wei Wuxian asked back.**

**"You asked if he wanted it," Lan Wangji argued, "Doesn't that mean you're going to buy it?"**

**"Asking is asking, buying is buying," Wei Wuxian countered, "Who said you have to buy once you ask?"**

**Lan Wangji gave up, looking at A-Yuan, "Which one do you want?" He looked back to the stand, "Among these, which do you want?"**

**A-Yuan pointed. Lan Wangji met Wei Wuxian's gaze again, before obligingly buying multiple toys for the child.**

Who would have thought Hanguang-Jun would be the indulgent parent?

It was another piece of information that only made sense after watching this entire story.

Wei Wuxian grew up on the streets. He likely spent just as much time staring longingly at vendors. Looking was free after all. He'd never be able to purchase them himself. So he settled for just looking, and then going about his day as though he didn't want those things.

Just like he lived his life as an adult. Wanting something, but never willing to admit it because it was something unattainable.

Hanguang-Jun was also raised with restrictions, but it was different. He never lacked the means. He was restrained by the rules of his Sect. Those restraints were only as strong as his regard for them. As he got older and saw the flaws in those rules, he gained more and more freedom.

Still, as much as Hanguang-Jun wanted to give Wei Wuxian whatever he wanted, he didn't know what Wei Wuxian wanted.

So he indulged the child, knowing that Wei Wuxian cared for him.

**Wei Wuxian took A-Yuan to the side to play with the toy swords as Lan Wangji settled paying for them. Wei Wuxian glanced away to catch Lan Wangji smiling at them. A-Yuan followed his gaze, and ran up to hug Lan Wangji's legs again.**

**Wei Wuxian lounged against the steps, "Lan Zhan. Congratulations! He's fond of you now. He'll hug the thighs of those he likes and never let go." Wei Wuxian paused, then got up, "So how about you quit your night hunt and we can have a meal together."**

**"A meal?" Lan Wangji echoed.**

**Wei Wuxian nodded, “Don’t be cold. You’ve never come to Yiling and I ran into you. Let’s talk about our old days.” Lan Wangji just looked down, so Wei Wuxian grabbed his arm, “Come on. Let’s go.”**

Just like before the war.

Would Wei Wuxian drag Hanguang-Jun around everywhere?

It wasn’t like Hanguang-Jun would ever protest.

Many things in life were complicated, but for all its complications there were still simple truths.

Madam Jin was surprised she was still allowed to sit in this room. She thought, with the bastard now advising her son, that she would be considered a participant in her husband’s crimes. But Jin Guangyao hadn’t so much as pretended to interrogate her. There were no attempts at revenge for her humiliation of him.

Nothing. He hadn’t so much as looked at her since Guangshan was confined.

Then again, without Guangshan they were nothing to each other. He didn’t have to pretend to be nice to her so Guangshan would have the pleasure of seeing her put him in his place. She didn’t have to attack him with Jin Zixuan now the Sect Leader, her son’s own heir nestled in the arms of his wife.

A-Xuan was also now fully aware of what happened in the shadows of Koi Tower. He no longer needed her protection.

She still hated the bastard, but without Guangshan there...things were different.

**A-Yuan played with his new toys as the two men sat on opposite sides of the table. The child kept getting closer and closer to Lan Wangji.**

**“A-Yuan. A-Yuan,” Wei Wuxian scolded, “Come here. Come.”**

**“No,” A-Yuan sat down on Lan Wangji’s lap, “No. I won’t.”**

**“A-Yuan,” Wei Wuxian sighed, “You are in his way.”**

**“It’s fine,” Lan Wangji assured him, “Let him sit.”**

**Wei Wuxian smiled, “Well. A-Yuan. You’ve changed. Ready to turn to anyone for material benefit, huh?”**

**Lan Wangji hid his smile by drinking tea.**

Nie Mingjue smiled at Xichen’s smile.

Ah, so this was all it took for Wangji to fall in love again. A fight on the rooftop for Wei Wuxian. A hug in the streets for Wen Yuan.

“It almost makes me want children,” Nie Mingjue muttered.

“You don’t want children?” Lady Luo inquired.

He snorted, “Do I seem like the type?”

The young woman considered him, “Didn’t you raise Nie Huaisang?”

“That isn’t the same,” Nie Mingjue dismissed.

There wasn’t a choice for him. Their mother died when Huaisang was young. Their father died not much longer after that. It was him or leave Huaisang at the mercy of the elders. Even back then, Huaisang had been obviously...soft. He wanted to protect that as long as he could. He thought he succeeded.

If Nie Mingjue had a kid, who would he take after? Himself? Huaisang? Maybe he’d get lucky and the kid would take after their mother, or choose to emulate Xichen.

He almost laughed at himself for imagining a future where he had a child. He never would a few days ago.

“You’d make a good father, if that’s what you’re concerned about,” Lady Qin murmured.

“If I ever meet the right woman,” He murmured back, “Or one that meets Huaisang’s standards.”

Lady Luo snorted.

**Their food was served soon after that, the child going back to his seat to enjoy his soup. He ate a few mouthfuls before holding some out, “Xian-gege.”**

**Wei Wuxian ate it, “Good. It’s good.” He pinched A-Yuan’s cheek, “You do know what filial piety means, huh?”**

**A-Yuan giggled.**

**“Eat without speech,” Lan Wangji said, and when the child just stared at him blankly, repeated, “Don’t talk when eating.” A-Yuan nodded, then went back to eating silently.**

**“Outrageous!” Wei Wuxian looked at Lan Wangji, “I have to repeat myself several times before he obeys. Yet you just need to say it once. Outrageous.”**

**Lan Wangji looked at the child, then back, “Eat without speech. You too.”**

Lan Xichen smiled.

This was the family Wangji deserved. This was the family waiting for him in the Burial Mounds as soon as they cleared Wei Wuxian’s name of his final crime.

“I imagined he would misbehave,” Uncle commented quietly.

“He would not have survived if he did not know how to listen,” Wangji replied.

Lan Xichen closed his eyes. It wasn't that he was trying to ignore that A-Yuan would come with trauma. He was just confident Wangji and Wei Wuxian could give him the right home to thrive in. Maybe A-Yuan would listen better than other small children, maybe he would overcompensate and become a little hellion.

There was never a way of knowing.

**Wei Wuxian laughed, “You didn’t change a bit after all this time.” He raised his alcohol, “Why did you come to Yiling? I’m familiar with things here. Do you want me to be your guide?”**

**Lan Wangji looked down and picked up his tea.**

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian shook his head, “You really are an awful liar. You’re not coming for me, are you?”**

**Lan Wangji looked down again.**

**“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian lowered his drink, “I was going to ask you to come by my place, but if you want to talk about Qi, meditation and mind tranquility, then forget it. I can control myself. I need no one to save me.”**

Again with the misunderstandings.

Qin Su had never met Wei Wuxian in person before, but she was very tempted to hit him over the head with something when she did. If a man went against the orders of his family to visit her in exile, she wouldn't think he was there to lecture her on her choices.

Though that was the danger of being as quiet as Hanguang-Jun was. Wei Wuxian could guess some of his thoughts, but not all of them.

**“Wei Ying-”**

**“Alright. Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian interrupted, “I finally met someone I knew from before who doesn’t try to avoid me. It’s been several very stuffy months. Why don’t you tell me something about what big events happened out there?”**

**“Big events mean?” Lan Wangji clarified.**

**“Like if a new Sect appeared somewhere, whether a Sect expanded its residence, and which Sects allied, and so on,” Wei Wuxian elaborated, “Chatting, you know? Anything is fine.”**

**Lan Wangji considered this, then answered, “A marriage.”**

**“A marriage?” Wei Wuxian beamed, “Which Sects?”**

**“The LanlingJin and the YunmengJiang,” Lan Wangji said.**

“Oh,” A-Li whispered, “That’s how he knew.”

Jin Zixuan didn’t ask, just patted her hand. Of course he knew about her and Jiang Wanyin’s visit to Yiling. He hadn’t been happy that she was taking such a risk so close to the wedding, but he understood how important Wei Wuxian was to her. If he couldn’t come to their wedding, he could let him have a glimpse of what he’d truly care about.

A-Li, looking beautiful.

She grabbed his hand and held on tightly.

Perhaps it was a blessing that Hanguang-Jun was the one to deliver the news. Then Wei Wuxian could get the worst of his reaction out of the way.

**Wei Wuxian froze, his expression going through a myriad of emotions, “You mean my Shi-” He cut himself off, “Jiang-guniang and Jin Zixuan?” Lan Wangji nodded, “When will it be? When’s the ceremony?”**

**“Half a month,” Lan Wangji answered.**

**Wei Wuxian looked devastated, then forced a smile, “Such a big event. Jiang Cheng didn’t even try to find a way to tell me.” He sighed, “However, even if he told me, what could I do then? Officially, Jiang Cheng announced to the world that I defected and I have nothing to do with the YunmengJiang anymore. What could I do even if he’d told me?”**

**He took another long drink, his breathing coming harder and tears coming to his eyes, “It’s just that Jin Zixuan got what he desired,” He cleared his expression again, “Lan Zhan, what do you think of this marriage?” Lan Wangji averted his gaze, “Oh, that’s right. Why did I ask you? It’s not like you ever cared about these things.”**

**“I know that many say that Shijie doesn’t deserve Jin Zixuan behind her back. In my eyes though, the peacock is the one who doesn’t deserve my Shijie,” Wei Wuxian’s voice started to raise, and he slammed the alcohol on the table.**

**A-Yuan stuck his hand out to grab his wrist, calming him.**

Wen Qing looked down.

It tore at her to see Wei Wuxian so upset. It was terrible to know she had her family at the price of his.

Sometimes, she wondered how it could possibly be enough. How could he sit there and smile with A-Yuan and not miss the youngest disciples of the Jiang Sect? How could he look at her and Wen Ning and not think of his own brother and sister?

Earlier, Wei Wuxian had been angry. Now, he was just resigned and depressed.

“It’s not your fault,” Jiang Wanyin whispered, “You can blame whoever you like, but don’t blame yourself.”

“This will be over soon,” Nie Huaisang promised.

But did that make it better? He still missed the wedding, and the birth of his nephew.

**“Lan Zhan, do you know? My Shijie, she deserves the best man in the world,” Wei Wuxian insisted, “Jiang Cheng and I once said that we’ll make Shijie’s wedding one that everyone praises for a hundred years. None would be equal to it. I’ll watch my Shijie get married with absolute splendor.” The tears were back.**

**“Mn,” Lan Wangji replied.**

**Wei Wuxian pouted, “What did you mn for? I won’t be able to watch it anyway.” He took another long drink, then brushed back A-Yuan’s hair.**

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji started.**

**Wei Wuxian froze, his hand reaching into his robes. He pulled out a talisman that started burning. His eyes widened, “Oh no, something happened on the Burial Mounds. Lan Zhan, we have to go!”**

“Were you going to invite him to the wedding?” Nie Huaisang asked.

Lan Wangji didn’t know. He might have. He just knew that he couldn’t sit there in silence while Wei Ying broke down. He wasn’t good at comforting, that much had been made obvious to him. He couldn’t make him feel better about missing the wedding unless he ensured he wouldn’t miss the wedding.

“That would have made things interesting,” Chifeng-Zun commented.

If Uncle hadn’t killed him for it.

Jiang Yanli wouldn’t have protested. Therefore, Jin Zixuan wouldn’t have either.

Coming to Koi Tower would have been a death sentence for Wei Ying and the Wen Remnants. Lan Wangji wasn’t enough to protect them from the Jin Sect’s schemes. Then again, given enough preparation, they could have snuck Wei Ying into Lanling. Or they could have disguised him.

There were ways, and in the face of Wei Ying's despair, Lan Wangji would have offered anything.

But they were interrupted.

They were always interrupted.

**Wei Wuxian scooped up A-Yuan and ran out.**

**Lan Wangji threw some money on the table, gathered up the boy’s toys, and ran after, quickly catching up and stopping him.**

**“Lan Zhan? Why are you following us?” Wei Wuxian demanded.**

**“Why not fly on your sword?” Lan Wangji asked.**

**“Forgot it,” Wei Wuxian answered.**

**Lan Wangji just took A-Yuan and started running again.**

**Wei Wuxian led the way, Chenqing held out at the ready. They found the beginning of the Wen Remnant’s residence being ransacked by resentment, the people being tossed around.**

The calm of the domestic scene dissipated at the reminder of the dangers.

It was no longer Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji having a nice lunch in town with a small child.

It was the Yiling Patriarch and Hanguang-Jun going into battle again.

**Wei Wuxian sent out a talisman to release one, then rose into the air. A burst of his own resentment drove back the attacking energy.**

Though they should have guessed there wouldn’t be much of a battle.

The Burial Mounds were Wei Wuxian’s domain.

Hanguang-Jun didn’t even need to pull his blade.

**Lan Wangji handed A-Yuan over to Popo.**

**“Fourth Uncle?” Wei Wuxian assisted the older man, “What happened?”**

**“It’s the Demon Subduing Cave,” Fourth Uncle said, “Something happened there.”**

**“Didn’t I set a restriction there before I left?” Wei Wuxian asked, “Who changed it?”**

**“Nobody! It was...”**

**“A-Ning!” They heard Wen Qing scream.**

Finally!

Nie Huaisang couldn’t shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen, but his shoulders relaxed. Wei Wuxian wasn’t even in the Burial Mounds when Wen Ning woke up. Sure, he set up the talismans that made it possible, but it wasn’t in some sadistic ritual.

It was Wen Ning’s resilience that brought him back.

**Following her cries, they found a few more of the Wen Remnants battling an awakened Wen Ning.**

**“Wen Ning!” Wei Wuxian shouted.**

**Lan Wangji sent forward some of his spiritual energy to protect another Wen Remnant.**

**That got Wen Ning's attention, though his eyes were milky white. Wei Wuxian temporarily stopped him with another talisman, "I've been using the Amulet to cure Wen Ning, hoping it can help him regain his consciousness. This is the last step. I didn't expect that..."**

**"A-Ning!" Wen Qing caught up.**

**"Didn't I say do not touch the talismans on him?" Wei Wuxian asked.**

**"Nobody touched them!" Wen Qing shouted, "Not a single person went into the cave! He suddenly went on a rampage himself and ruined all the restrictions. The resentful energy in the blood pool all got released."**

Those were some concerning words.

Jin Guangyao almost didn't want to know what the Demon Subduing Cave and the Blood Pool were. With Wei Wuxian's dramatics and terrible sense of humor, the name could come from some weirdly shaped rock or that he cut himself once in a memorable way.

There were some murmurs at the mention of the Amulet.

They really needed to find a solution to that. As long as the power existed, there would be those who sought it for themselves. He could guess that Huaisang planned to market Wei Wuxian's other creations, make him something irreplaceable in order to give him some measure of safety, but nothing he could invent would ever match the raw power of the Amulet.

Could it be destroyed? Would destroying it kill whoever performed the act?

Not that there were many who could perform such an act. Jin Guangyao had been studying demonic cultivation, but he'd never be as powerful as Wei Wuxian. His gaze fell to where Su Minshan still sat, rather smug since Jin Zixun's arrest. Even the two of them would not be enough, though it would be a fitting end.

There was still the piece of the Yin Iron in Xue Yang's possession to consider. What would destroying the Amulet accomplish if Xue Yang just managed to reforge it?

**Wen Ning let out another burst of resentment.**

**"Wen Qing," Wei Wuxian stopped her from helping, "You take them away first."**

**She retreated with the other Wens.**

**Wei Wuxian darted forwards, testing the energy around Wen Ning. He was thrown back, but Lan Wangji caught him. Then Wen Ning hopped over the nearby ridge.**

**"The talisman wall was destroyed," Wei Wuxian said, "No one can stop him now. We can't let him go down the hill!"**



**They pursued.**

**Lan Wangji pulled out his guqin and began to play, immobilizing Wen Ning again.**

**Wei Wuxian started placing talismans over his body and manipulating the resentment within him. Eventually he traced a symbol over his chest, spinning back as soon as he finished.**

**“A-Ning!” Wen Qing shouted, “Hanguang-Jun, please go easy on him!”**

**Lan Wangji sent a gentle burst of energy that finally stopped Wen Ning’s animalistic shouting. He dismissed his guqin and came to stand next to Wei Wuxian.**

**The next time Wen Ning opened his eyes, they were normal.**

Jiang Yanli was amazed.

She knew that Wen Ning was unlike any other fierce corpse, but it was still amazing to see just how much A-Xian was able to bring back.

“I don’t think that is replicable,” Her husband said.

She hummed. She hoped no one would try to copy that. To begin with, no one had A-Xian’s mastery of demonic cultivation. Nor did anyone possess the same skill as Hanguang-Jun. Not just his power or restraint, but his ability to work with and around A-Xian.

This only cemented that A-Xian and Hanguang-Jun could do anything.

**Lan Wangji went to move forward, but Wei Wuxian stopped him, “Lan Zhan. Wait a second.”**

**“G-gongzi,” Wen Ning stammered.**

**Wei Wuxian ran forward, placing a hand on his shoulder, “Wen Ning.”**

**“Wei-gongzi,” Wen Ning rasped.**

**“A-Ning,” Wen Qing touched his other shoulder.**

**Wen Ning turned to her, “JieJie.”**

**“It’s done! A-Ning woke up!” The other Wen cheered, “Let’s go back and tell everyone!”**

**“It’s me,” Wen Qing cried, “It’s your sister.” She pulled him in for a hug.**

How could anyone deny him a second chance at life?

No one could bring themselves to say Wen Ning should be destroyed. It was obvious that he was no longer a danger, not if he could recognize his loved ones. His eyes were clear, and they made him appear far more human than the rumors claimed.

After all he'd unfairly suffered, he deserved to continue existing.

**Wei Wuxian turned back to Lan Wangji, offering a small smile.**

**The rest of the Wen Remnants came quickly, watching as Wen Wuxian performed an assessment, "How do you feel now?"**

**"I...I want to cry," Wen Ning answered, "But I can't."**

**"You just had a nightmare," Wei Wuxian assured him, "It's alright now."**

**"You did it," Lan Wangji praised.**

**Wei Wuxian walked up to him, "Of course. I am a man of my word."**

**They both watched the Wen siblings cling to each other.**

Wei Wuxian did it.

Jiang Cheng knew that. He'd seen Wen Ning with his own eyes. But he hadn't seen Wen Ning and Wen Qing. It didn't fully strike him the enormity of what Wei Wuxian had done.

Of how well he fulfilled their debt to the siblings.

It was because of Wen Ning and Wen Qing that Jiang Cheng had been able to embrace his siblings again.

They were all lucky to still be able to do that.

**"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian broke the silence, "Since you're here, why not pay a visit?"**

**Wei Wuxian brought Lan Wangji into his cave, which now held more candles and experiments.**

**"Demon-subduing cave?" Lan Wangji looked around.**

**"That's right," Wei Wuxian replied, "I came up with the name. How is it?"**

**Lan Wangji looked away.**

**"Terrible," Nie Huaisang declared.**

MianMian agreed. The place didn't deserve such an intimidating name. Not when Wei Wuxian had settled in so well. There was actually a bed, and all the candles gave it enough light that she could almost forget it was in the Burial Mounds. What was the point of such a name anyways?

The Wen Remnants knew he was no demon.

Everyone else was too scared to approach the Burial Mounds, much less sneak into where he was sleeping.

It would be impossible to kill Wei Wuxian like that.

Or most means. He was like a cockroach that way. That wasn't to say that he couldn't die, but no one would kill him unless he let himself be killed.

Wei Wuxian was self-sacrificial enough to let that happen.

**"I know," Wei Wuxian said, "In your heart, you must be saying 'not good'. Actually I picked up some comments out there, saying that I'm a person who studies demonic cultivation and how could I be so shameless as to call my den the Demon-subduing cave?"**

**Wei Wuxian continued to walk around him, "But they're all wrong. What I really meant with the name is not at all what they interpreted it as and its meaning is also different from what the Demon-subduing Palace Xue Chonghai built means."**

**"How?" Lan Wangji turned around to face him.**

**"Simple," Wei Wuxian said, "Just because I sleep here often. A cave with a demonic man lying. Shouldn't it be the Demon-subduing cave?" He grinned at the pun, "Come on. Let me show you around."**

It was an unnecessary reminder that Wei Wuxian wasn't who they said he was.

It was also an unnecessary reminder that they very easily could have forced him to become the very monster they feared.

**Further back in the former palace was a pool of blood, guarded by talismans.**

**"The energy is dense," Lan Wangji observed.**

**"That's right," Wei Wuxian replied, "The Yin energy is dense but fit for cultivation. This is my healing land, just like your Sect's cold spring. Wen Ning used to be here for healing, but since the Amulet drew Wen Ning's original resentment out of his body, the water in the pool started smelling more and more like blood. So it's called the Blood Pool."**

**"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji turned to him.**

**"What?" Wei Wuxian asked.**

**"Can you really control it?" Lan Wangji asked.**

And they were back to this.

Qin Su sighed. Even when Hanguang-Jun used his words, he used the wrong ones. It was like Jiang Wanyin's visit all over again. Neither seemed able to voice their true concerns.

Jiang Wanyin focused on the opinions of the cultivation world, when he was truly worried about losing his brother.

Hanguang-Jun was once again focused on control, on the potential effects of demonic cultivation, when he was also just worried about Wei Wuxian. No wonder Wei Wuxian struggled to see that others care about him when they hid their worry behind other concerns.

Though she would be a little concerned if the love of her life showed her a pool of blood he had in his back rooms. Even if it wasn't threatening.

**“Control what?” Wei Wuxian evaded, “You mean Wen Ning? Of course I can.” He started walking away, “Look, he’s already returned to consciousness.”**

**“What if he lost consciousness again?” Lan Wangji wondered.**

**Wei Wuxian paused, “I’ve been the expert on dealing with his rampages. Now he is controlled by the Amulet. As long as I can control the Amulet, nothing will happen to him.”**

**Lan Wangji paused, then continued, “But what if something does happen to you or the Amulet?”**

**“It won’t,” Wei Wuxian assured him.**

**“How could you be sure?”**

**“It won’t,” Wei Wuxian repeated, more serious, “And it can’t.”**

“Wangji,” Lan Xichen sighed.

All he had to do was clarify that his concern was not about Wei Wuxian losing control and what it would mean to others, but for Wei Wuxian himself.

If only Wei Wuxian cared about himself.

“I know,” Wangji said.

It went beyond that though. Wei Wuxian didn't like to admit weakness. He didn't like to admit he was helpless. He couldn't, not when admitting he was weak could potentially lead to the truth about his golden core. So he had to pretend like he was strong, that he wasn't concerned about the future.

How would he react to everyone knowing about his golden core?

Probably not well.

Lan Xichen grimaced. Definitely not well. He hoped Wangji and Jiang Wanyin's communication skills had improved seeing their past failures, but Wei Wuxian was evasive.

**“You want to keep it this way from now on?” Lan Wangji asked.**

**Wei Wuxian smiled, “What’s wrong with keeping it this way? Tell you what. Don’t underestimate this land. This mountain here is even bigger than Cloud Recesses. Our**

**food here tastes much better too.”**

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji scolded, “You know what I mean.”**

**“Lan Zhan, you...” Wei Wuxian trailed off, then turned to him, “You really are something out of this world. I’ve already avoided the topic and you brought it up again.” He then turned to cough violently into his arm.**

**“Your injuries,” Lan Wangji grabbed his arm.**

**Wei Wuxian wrenched it back, “No need. Why use spiritual energy for such a small wound? I can just sit here and it’ll heal itself.” He turned away.**

Now he was scared.

Wei Ying was scared of him finding out the truth, so he didn’t let him close.

Lan Wangji found it oddly calming. He now knew the reason behind his behaviors, and he had a tentative plan to address them. He just needed to make it extremely obvious that he didn’t care what state Wei Ying was in. He loved Wei Ying, whatever his status might be, whatever his strengths were currently in, wherever he might be calling home.

He needed to be clear.

He could do that.

**“It’ll heal itself?” Wen Qing demanded, “Am I dead?”**

**Both Wen siblings smiled as they approached with a small tray.**

**“Wei-gongzi,” Wen Ning spoke in a stronger voice, “Lan-er-gongzi.”**

**“Why are you here?” Wei Wuxian asked, “Finished crying so soon?”**

**Wen Qing huffed and narrowed her eyes, “Just watch how I’ll make you cry later.”**

**Wei Wuxian scoffed and crossed his arms, “What a joke! Just by yourself?”**

**Wen Qing walked behind him and hit his back, forcing up the bad blood. Wei Wuxian shakily turned to her and pointed an accusing finger, “You...you are so cruel.”**

**“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji caught him as he swooned.**

Nie Mingjue snorted.

For someone trying hard to hide a secret, he couldn’t resist falling into Wangji’s arms.

He felt more assured they would work things out. If their last meeting had been at Qiongqi Pass, he would have worried more. But seeing this, seeing Wangji with A-Yuan and how Wei Wuxian still joked and tried to be his normal self, it settled his lingering doubt.

Maybe they would all be okay.

Not now. Maybe not for some time, but eventually.

The Wen Sect tried to destroy them. They failed. The Jin Sect tried to turn them against each other. They also failed.

What they did succeed in breaking could be fixed.

**“I have crueller things,” Wen Qing drawled, holding her needles up, “Do you want to see?”**

**Wei Wuxian’s eyes crossed as he focused on the needles, and he pushed her arm away as he evaded, “Spare me please. I wouldn’t want to try that.”**

**“Wei-gongzi,” Wen Ning drew closer, “I’m sorry.”**

**“Ay,” Wei Wuxian patted his shoulder, “Enough, enough. You really thought you could hurt me with a punch like that?”**

**They moved away from the blood pool, Lan Wangji going to sit by a table. Wen Ning set down a cup of water.**

**“Wait a second,” Wei Wuxian interjected, “What’s going on? How can you let a guest drink plain water? Where is the tea?”**

**“I asked and they said there was no tea,” Wen Ning answered.**

**“That’s so inappropriate, Wen Ning,” Wei Wuxian scolded, “The next time a guest comes over, we must prepare...” He trailed off, “Right. We won’t have more guests.”**

**Lan Wangji just nodded.**

Jiang Cheng added that to the growing list in his head.

It hadn’t been discussed yet, but he was planning to take the Wen Remnant to Lotus Pier. Yunmeng was closest to Yiling. Madam Liu would recognize Wen Ning. She’d vouch for him, and by extension his family.

He should have done it from the beginning. It wouldn’t be too hard to settle them in now. He had been meaning to expand the medical quarters. Maybe he could put their new residence around there. Make it clear Wen Qing was there as a doctor, and that her word was law when it came to medicine.

They would have whatever they wanted.

Everything they’d lacked during their exile.

**Not long after that, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji were back outside the cave, overlooking the small settlement.**

**“Let’s go,” Wei Wuxian walked forward, “I’ll see you off down the hill.”**

**Lan Wangji walked behind him. They didn’t speak as they made their way to the boundary.**

**Then Wei Wuxian stopped, “Lan Zhan, you asked me if I intended to keep it this way from now on. To be honest, I’d also like to ask what I can do except this? Give up on demonic cultivation and surrender the Amulet? Then what about the people on this mountain?” He looked at him, “Turn them in? I can’t do that.”**

**“I believe that if you were me, you couldn’t do that either,” Wei Wuxian continued, “Can anybody give me a nice, favorable choice? A choice where I could protect those I want to protect without needing the demonic arts and using the Amulet?”**

**Lan Wangji didn’t reply.**

**Wei Wuxian looked away, “Lan Zhan. Thank you.” Lan Wangji finally looked at him, “Thanks for your company today and thanks for telling me that Shijie’s going to marry.” He sighed, “But, let the self judge the right and the wrong. Let others decide to praise or to blame. Let gains and losses remain uncommented on.”**

**“What I should do...I know it,” Wei Wuxian looked at him again, “I believe that I’ll be able to control it well.” He smiled tightly, though Lan Wangji was no longer looking at him.**

**Lan Wangji closed his eyes, his expression tightening.**

**Beautiful words once again from Wei Wuxian.**

**And once again they were said to Hanguang-Jun.**

**Did he hear it again? The brutal honesty, the thinly veiled yearning. The resignation he was trying to pass off as being at peace with his circumstances.**

**Did Wei Wuxian know how much pain his words caused the man who loved him?**

**Did he know how much pain his words now caused those who had come to care for him?**

**There was never another choice. Not one Wei Wuxian could live with.**

**“Gege!” A-Yuan emerged, clinging to Lan Wangji’s leg again, “Gege! Stay today and eat with us?” He rocked back and forth with a hopeful smile.**

**“Wei-gongzi,” Popo came after him, “I’m sorry. A-Yuan-”**

**Wei Wuxian shook his head, then dismissed her with a nod.**

**“A-Yuan, come here,” Wei Wuxian held out his hand again, “Come on, A-Yuan,” He easily swung the child up into his arms and balanced him on his hip, “This gege has food back in his own home. He won’t be staying.”**

**“But A-Yuan heard a secret,” A-Yuan protested, “They said that there’ll be lots of tasty food today.”**

**“A-Yuan,” Wei Wuxian scolded, then turned to Lan Wangji with a little hope in his eyes.**

**“I’m leaving,” Lan Wangji said.**

If Wei Ying had asked, he would have stayed.

If Wei Ying had given him any indication that his presence by his side wouldn’t have just been another burden, he would have stayed.

Lan Wangji wished he had stayed.

**Wei Wuxian nodded, staying in the clearing to watch him leave. He started back into the Burial Mounds, glancing every few steps but Lan Wangji didn’t stop.**

**“Xian-gege,” A-Yuan started, “Will Rich-gege ever come here again?”**

**“Who is Rich-gege?” Wei Wuxian stopped to ask?”**

**“The rich brother is Rich-gege,” A-Yuan explained.**

**Wei Wuxian snatched his toy from his hand, “You really like him that much, huh?”**

**Lan Wangji froze while he was still in hearing distance. He turned around to watch them.**

Just missing each other.

Just out of sync.

**“Rich-gege?” Nie Huaisang smiled, “I hope he keeps calling Hanguang-Jun that.”**

It was sad that the boy would look at a Lan and consider that the height of luxury, but it was also funny. Wei Wuxian would complain daily about living in Cloud Recesses, but their son would have the time of his life.

**“He does know how to use people’s names,” Wen Qing sighed.**

**“That’s no fun,” Nie Huaisang clicked his tongue, “I’m going to tell him to call Jiang Cheng Purple-gege.”**

**“You better not,” Jiang Cheng glowered at him.**

**“Angry-gege,” He teased.**

His friend growled.

**A-Yuan hopped to get it back, “Give it back!”**



**“Try to get it,” Wei Wuxian teased, “Try.”**

**“Give it back! He bought it for me!”**

**“I won’t,” Wei Wuxian spun him around in circles, “Unless you say that you like Xian-gege.”**

**“I like Xian-gege,” A-Yuan repeated.**

**Lan Wangji watched as Wei Wuxian gave it back and pinched his cheek. Then he took the little boy’s hand again and they continued up the path.**

**“Xian-gege, will Rich-gege come back again or not?” A-Yuan asked.**

**Wei Wuxian sighed, “Probably not.”**

**A-Yuan wiped at his eye, “Why?”**

**“There’s no why,” Wei Wuxian considered the question, “In this world, everyone has their own things to do, their own paths to walk.”**

**A-Yuan nodded in understanding.**

**“Who cares about the crowded, broad avenue?” Wei Wuxian raised his voice, “I’ll stick to my single-log bridge until it’s dark.”**

**Lan Wangji watched him disappear into the darkness, then turned away and finally left.**

**It was an interesting outlook on life.**

**For so many, they didn’t have to forge their own path in life. They simply had to follow the road laid down by their ancestors. They never looked to the side. They never wondered what possibilities were hidden just off the beaten path.**

**No one strayed from the path. No one dared to.**

**Forging one’s own path was dangerous. To leave the road was to be alone. If one stumbled on their new path, there wouldn’t be others nearby to help them. It would be so easy to become lost when one’s direction was unclear.**

**Wei Wuxian had no choice but to stick to his new path, regardless of the dangers.**

**But who decided the most traveled road was the best one?**

**Wei Wuxian turned his declaration into a little song as full darkness settled in, and he bounced A-Yuan to its beat. He froze when he saw the lanterns set up outside. A-Yuan slipped from his arms and ran ahead, “Dark? Not dark at all.”**

**The child held his hand out expectantly, and Wei Wuxian moved to his side to take it, admiring the lanterns. He went inside to see everyone eating.**

**Everyone rose as he made his way further in.**

At least he wasn't completely alone.

Wei Wuxian may be the one testing the strength of this new path, but it was only so he could guide others to safety.

It may not be the family he imagined he'd have, or the love of his life by his side, but it was someone.

**"You have hung so many lanterns today, isn't that too costly?" Wei Wuxian asked.**

**"We hung them for you," Wen Qing answered, "We'll make more tomorrow to hang them along the mountain path. If you rush around in the dark all the time, you'll slip and break your bones someday." A few snickered, "Why not sit?"**

**"Okay. Let's sit," Wei Wuxian sat, but everyone else was still crowded around him, "Why? Haven't you started yet?"**

**"No," Wen Qing answered, "We were waiting for you."**

**"Why did you wait for me?" Wei Wuxian asked.**

**Fourth Uncle poured him a cup of something, and Wen Qing presented it to him, "These past few days, you've worked hard."**

**"You're suddenly talking so nicely to me," Wei Wuxian accepted, "I'm kind of scared."**

**The Wen Remnants laughed.**

**"Actually, they all wanted to have dinner with you, so they could thank you," Wen Qing explained, "But you're either jumping up and down, running around, or shut inside the Cave and staying there for days upon end, not letting anyone disturb you. They didn't want to hold up your work and annoy you."**

**"They thought you didn't like interacting with others and didn't want to talk to them, so they were embarrassed to talk to you," Wen Qing continued, smiling, "Now, A-Ning has woken up, and everyone was busy celebrating. So they didn't have time to talk to you. It's fine even if you don't eat. Just sit here with everyone, and we can chat and have a few drinks."**

**Everyone dispersed to sit and begin.**

They thought Wei Wuxian didn't like interacting with others?

That was all Jin Zixuan needed to hear to know he hadn't been coping well. It was hard to imagine Wei Wuxian being reserved and quiet. He was always outspoken, always in the way.

Yes, he'd quieted down when he started demonic cultivation, but even then he was always accompanied by Jiang Wanyin or Hanguang-Jun.

At least it looked like it got better? He no longer needed to devote time to curing Wen Ning.

But what did Wei Wuxian do after he brought Wen Ning back?

As far as Jin Zixuan knew, no one had dared attack the Burial Mounds. The Wen Remnants seemed to have farming well in hand. Maybe Wei Wuxian was the one to go into the village on the off chance they were attacked, but they had Wen Ning now. Wen Ning was a lot less vulnerable.

So what did Wei Wuxian do? What happened to a man who spent his entire life reacting when there was nothing to react to?

Did he finally find peace or a new type of despair?

**"Drink?" Wei Wuxian asked, "There's liquor up here?"**

**"Yeah, there is!" A Wen approached him with a jug.**

**"Here," Fourth Uncle opened it, "Fruit wine, made from the wild fruits on the mountain. Have a try."**

**"Fourth Uncle likes drinking. He knows how to brew," Wen Qing smiled, "And made this especially for you. He's been trying for many days."**

**Wei Wuxian's eyes widened, "Really? Then I have to try some!" He smelled it, "It's really rich!" Then he took a drink, "Good! Give me another bowl!" They obliged, "You made all these dishes?"**

**Wen Qing laughed, "It's A-Ning."**

**"Wen Ning," Wei Wuxian repeated, as the man came into the room with another bowl.**

**"Coal-gege!" A-Yuan declared, pointing at Wen Ning's dirty face, "Coal-gege."**

**The Wen Remnants laughed, and Wen Qing rose to clean her brother's face. It reminded Wei Wuxian of all the times Jiang Yanli did the same for him.**

**Wei Wuxian raised his bowl, "Everyone. Drink!"**

**They toasted him, and drank.**

That really wasn't the best time to reintroduce Wei Wuxian to alcohol.

If there was a silver lining to living in the Burial Mounds, it was that Wei Wuxian couldn't afford to drink to excess like he had in Yunmeng.

Forced sobriety was still sobriety, but it removed another thing Wei Wuxian used to distract himself with. Without a goal to work towards, without something concrete to do, and without alcohol to keep him occupied, Wei Wuxian had nothing left but his thoughts.

They'd all seen how unkind those were.

They had to be worse with all the resentment around him. They hadn't seen him quite so upset that the voices of the dead started whispering to him again, but that was always a possibility. He was always one misstep away from falling off the edge and hurting himself.

**Wen Qing watched him outdrink everyone around him, and still have the power to stumble around and drink more.**

**"Wen Qing," He complained, "There's no more wine."**

**"There are four more bottles," Wen Qing said, "We can save them for later. You can call it a day for now."**

**"How could this be?" Wei Wuxian wondered, "They say that a good name after death can't compare to some good wine when living. A full cup, please." He pouted at her.**

**Wen Qing obliged, "There's no next time. I really think you should quit drinking. You drink way too heavily."**

**"It's not like it's the Cloud Recesses here," Wei Wuxian scoffed, "Why should I quit drinking?" He sat down, and savored his last bowl. A somber air settled around him, "Wen Qing. The first time I met Lan Zhan was when I brought Emperor's Smile into Cloud Recesses." He laughed, "What a pity that you didn't see his face, his stony face."**

**"But," He continued drunkenly, "Emperor's Smile of Gusu is really delicious. I wonder if there's a chance to drink it again."**

**Wen Qing stopped trying to clean up, and looked at him worriedly.**

**"I'm good for nothing," Wei Wuxian muttered, "I promised my Shijie that I would help her hold the most splendid wedding in the world. But now, I can't even attend the wedding." He sniffled, "I am completely useless. I am completely useless." He tightened his grip on the bowl, but it didn't break, "I am completely useless."**

Completely useless.

As though everybody always had to be of use. As though life had any other meaning than what those living gave it.

Nie Huaisang hated being called useless, but he also knew his purpose in life wasn't to serve others. They called him useless because he wasn't doing what they wanted him to do. They said he was weak because his strengths weren't in the areas they wanted. It was impossible to be useless unless there was someone trying to use him.

A small part of him admitted that his uselessness was a test. If he acted so contrary to the expectations set before him, how far could he go before they discarded him?

How much could the Sect push to have him disinherited before Da-ge gave in?

Unconditional positive regard was so hard to be sure of, because it was so hard to remove all the potential conditions. There would always be that lingering doubt that if he stopped doing such and such, he would lose the love of those he loved.

Wei Wuxian now had that with the Wen Remnants. There was nothing he could do that would lose him their loyalty, their familiarity, their love.

Nie Huaisang wondered if Wei Wuxian saw that.

**The next morning, Lan Wangji returned to Cloud Recesses, where he was made to kneel immediately, holding the discipline ruler in front of him.**

**The memory skipped, the sun rising and falling as the day passed. He remained kneeling, even as snow began to fall. He remained unmoving, his posture perfect, the ruler never falling from its position.**

**It was night when a disciple approached, “Master Lan said Hanguang-Jun can leave now.”**

**Lan Wangji rose, leaving a space devoid of snow.**

“Why?” Jiang Yanli demanded.

She didn’t need to clarify herself. The question had been building for quite some time. Why was the Lan Sect so harsh to Hanguang-Jun? Why did they feel the need to punish him for following his heart? Yes, she knew A-Xian didn’t have the best reputation, but what was holding Hanguang-Jun back going to do about it?

Lessons in love should be learnt the hard way. Otherwise they would just lead to a lifetime or regret. Honestly, if she were Lan Qiren, and she was so convinced of A-Xian’s demonic nature, she’d let Hanguang-Jun figure it out himself. Let A-Xian drive him away, instead of trying to prevent it.

“A-Li,” Her husband started, “Maybe this shouldn’t be discussed in public.”

“After all that’s been seen, the Lan Sect can hardly lose face,” Jiang Yanli replied, entirely focused on Zewu-Jun.

“We don’t speak of it,” Lan Qiren declared.

“It? Can’t you at least say them?” Nie Huaisang wondered, “They are your brother and sister-in-law. The parents of your nephews, at the very least.”

“Huaisang,” Chifeng-Zun warned.

If Chifeng-Zun knew... “A-Yao,” She turned to her brother-in-law, “Is my request unreasonable?”

Guangyao tilted his head, “I’ve only learned of the matter recently. I have not...given it much thought.”

Not with everything else going on. There were far more recent pains to consider than whatever befell Hanguang-Jun and Zewu-Jun’s parents over a decade ago.

“Our parents’ mistakes aren’t ours,” A-Cheng said.

Jiang Yanli nodded. A-Cheng refrained from using Zidian against A-Xian. He still left him with a stab wound, but also took a broken arm. Her mother never would have allowed what she would have seen as weakness. Her father would have continued to protect A-Xian out of guilt, even if it endangered their Sect again. He’d have overlooked A-Xian’s struggles until he broke.

A part of her knew that A-Xian would have broken at Lotus Pier. That the same thoughts of uselessness would have plagued him. While the Burial Mounds were a prison, the place protected him and gave him some purpose. Jiang Yanli wouldn’t have been able to help him until she knew what was wrong.

Until now.

“We will not judge you for them,” Jiang Yanli met Zewu-Jun’s gaze. After seeing the mess of her parent’s marriage, and being sworn brothers with the proof of the Jin’s marriage problems, what worse could the Lan have done?

The conflict in them cleared, “It would do more harm than good to keep it secret now, wouldn’t it?”

Not necessarily. They were still the Lan Sect. Most of Zewu-Jun’s faults came from his virtues. He was a caring, compassionate man, but his devotion to his sworn brothers also led him to turn his back on those who needed that compassion. His devotion to his younger brother made A-Xian a threat in his mind, even if it was a different threat than the rest of the world believed.

Jiang Yanli nodded anyway. She needed to know.

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MianMian sent a horrified look towards Qin Su.

This was a secret that could definitely do more harm than good, and when Qin Su just sent a puzzled look back, MianMian scanned the room.

Maybe it was just her. The way she was brought up, she was acutely aware of what powerful men did to vulnerable women. Those who committed despicable acts needed to have a respectable reputation. Otherwise they’d never get away with their crimes. Men were so slow to see the truth, to see their friends, their masters, as the monsters they were.

Why would Madam Lan kill someone and never explain why she killed them?

Because she knew no one would believe her and the punishment would stay the same.

Why would she agree to marry Qingheng-Jun?

Maybe it was to save her own life. Maybe Qingheng-Jun didn't give her much choice. Or maybe it was something worse.

"Could it be that Zewu-Jun is not Qingheng-Jun's son?" Su Minshan asked.

Of course that slime would find the worst way to frame the story, even if it did make an awful amount of sense to MianMian.

"How dare you!" Chifeng-Zun shouted, but his anger didn't last at the look of horror on Nie Huaisang's face.

It made sense.

It made too much sense.

"What?" Su Minshan balked, "Wasn't that story the same? A Lan Sect man taking what was not willingly given?"

MianMian wasn't alive at the time. She didn't know enough. She glanced at Lan Qiren, hoping the teacher could say something. Anything. Say that Zewu-Jun wasn't a wedding baby. Say that there was no doubt about who his father was. Nobody here had a clear memory of what Qingheng-Jun looked like. Zewu-Jun and Hanguang-Jun could take after their mother.

"You're a disgusting, pathetic man," Jiang Wanyin growled, "How could you even think of that?"

"Doesn't it make sense?" Su Minshan sneered.

"Enough," Lianfeng-Zun ordered, rising, "Please leave, Su-zongzhu."

She'd almost forgotten those two were working together. Well, not anymore. She knew that Lianfeng-Zun would not stand for Zewu-Jun to be hurt. Su Minshan, the bitter traitor that he was, likely had his own plans regarding his former Sect.

Still, he left.

If only the damage hadn't already been done.

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"It doesn't change anything, Xiongzhang," Wangji said.

Lan Xichen closed his eyes. It shouldn't change things, but...he'd failed so many times. Watching these memories only reinforced how skewed his judgment was. He would have done nothing to save the Wen Remnants. He would have let the world turn against Wei Wuxian, probably contributed to bringing him down when they finally drove him over the edge.

If he was actually a bastard, then Wangji would be Sect Leader. Wangji could be Chief Cultivator. He was the one with the better judgment. He would never let politics interfere with what was right. And no one would dare threaten the beloved of the Chief Cultivator.

People were already talking. Things were already changing.

"Uncle?" Wangji pressed.

What could Uncle say that wouldn't be seen as defensive? Lan Xichen had never thought about their parents' situation this way, but now that it was out in the open, everyone would see their earlier secrecy as serving this purpose.

"If Zewu-Jun would allow me, there might be a test I can perform," Wen Qing offered.

Lan Xichen opened his eyes, "A test?"

The young woman who owed him nothing nodded, "Yes. I performed paternity tests for Wen Chao often enough, I believe I can modify one for this."

"Do it," Wangji commanded.

Lan Xichen just sat back and let it happen. He tried not to imagine the outcome. It wasn't like he would be turned away by the Lan Sect, but he'd seen how hard it was for A-Yao. Others may not treat him so kindly, whatever the circumstances surrounding his birth. Still, while he was sensitive to their opinions before, that was only because he had to be as Sect Leader.

Was it pathetic for some part of him to be relieved to no longer be Sect Leader?

"Perhaps a test first?" Nie Huaisang offered, "So there is no doubt."

Wen Qing passed over the completed talisman. Nie Huaisang activated it, and it lit up, sending a string of energy towards Da-ge.

A-Yao sighed, "We're looking for a shared father," He moved from his seat, "Let me."

So there would be no room for doubt.

When the talisman activated, it didn't just send the expected cord towards Jin Zixuan.

It also connected him to Qin Su.

It seemed he wasn't the only one who should be questioning their parentage.

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Her father left the room immediately as the crowd descended into chaos again.

Qin Su just stared at the connection. She continued staring even after it faded. It didn't make sense.

"My mother wouldn't cheat," She whispered.

Luo Qingyang reached over to squeeze her hand, "Maybe she didn't."

"That's not..." Qin Su hissed. She couldn't be Jin Guangshan's daughter. She had parents who loved her. Who loved each other. She'd never doubted that. She searched her memory for any sign. Was this why her parents didn't try for another child? Was this why she was an only child, when everyone said her mother should bear her father a son?

"I..." She tried to stand, but her legs were shaking, "My mother..."

Chifeng-Zun steadied her, "I will take you."

"Confronting her won't be a good idea," Luo Qingyang advised.

"What else can we do?" Chifeng-Zun asked, "Would Jin Guangshan tell the truth?"

Father already went to confront her. While he didn't go on nighthunts anymore, he was a capable cultivator. He would get there before her. Maybe it was a sign that her mother refused to come to Koi Tower.

Her thoughts clouded as Zewu-Jun confirmed that he was Hanguang-Jun's full brother. Not a half brother, not a bastard. He was truly Qingheng-Jun's son and heir.

She couldn't have cared less.

Hours may have passed, or minutes. Qin Su just stood there, gripping Chifeng-Zun's arm.

Finally, thought began to creep back in. If she wasn't her father's daughter, she couldn't be the next Qin Sect Leader. He'd still love her, but the elders and some of the disciples would never accept the leadership of a Jin bastard.

All that would be left for her was the original path, marriage.

"Who would want to marry me now?"

It was a silly thing to focus on, a selfish thing to focus on, but she just couldn't think about the conversation happening between her father and mother.

"Don't worry about that," Chifeng-Zun advised, all but forcing her to sit down, "I'll marry you."

Luo Qingyang scoffed, "You've known her for less than a day."

"Jin Guangshan won't ruin anyone else's life," The Nie Sect Leader growled.

Lianfeng-Zun had been...somewhat respected in the Nie Sect. At least by the Sect Leader and heir. While she'd only known Chifeng-Zun for a day, it had been one hell of a day. He had a temper, but he also was fiercely loyal to those he cared about. He was also trying harder to do the right thing, to live up to his reputation.

He was a good man, not like-

"It won't come to that," Someone else said, and she nearly jumped as Lianfeng-Zun knelt near her. He was holding the orb in his hand, "It appears we are done, Qin-guniang, if you would like to wait somewhere more private."

She stared at his face, looking for any similarities between them. They were both rather small, she supposed, with more delicate features, "Do you think it's true?"

Lianfeng-Zun grimaced, "There is very little I believe Jin Guangshan wouldn't do."

Qin Su felt tears come to her eyes. Her shoulders shook as she sobbed. Luo Qingyang pulled her close, but it was no comfort. She cried for all her mother had suffered through. She cried for the pain of keeping it a secret all those years. She cried because she could see now, how the kindness her mother had instilled in her was just in case the truth came out.

Her mother had raised her to be kind so Qin Su would be kind to herself.

She didn't see when her father returned, but she heard his demands. She would always be able to pick up her father's voice in a crowd.

He was demanding Jin Guangshan's head for the death of his wife.

Her mother.

That was all she could handle.

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"Get them out of here," Jin Zixuan whispered.

Jiang Cheng didn't bother arguing with him. They'd both moved to the entrance to Koi Tower to wait for Sect Leader Qin's return. He wasn't sure what his brother-in-law was thinking, but his expression had gone eerily still. Jiang Cheng didn't want his sister or his nephew around him like that, so he stayed.

He stayed until he saw the blood on Sect Leader Qin's robes, and the fury that could only come from despair on his face.

A-Jie clung to his back while he took to the sword, her baby swaddled between them to protect him from the wind. He glanced at the disciple flying with Wen Qing, then aimed them towards the Burial Mounds.

Whatever was about to go down in Koi Tower, they would have no part of.

As much as he would like to witness Jin Guangshan's downfall...

It was no longer about Wei Wuxian. It had never really been about Wei Wuxian. It had always been about Jin Guangshan taking what was not his through any means at his disposal. If this was what finally took him down, then it was only fitting.

There were a thousand things he wanted to say to Wei Wuxian. There was so much that needed to be said between them. Apologies, explanations, how much he cared about him even if he was being a self-sacrificial idiot.

But when he saw Wei Wuxian again, the words got stuck in his throat.

A-Jie was torn between running into Wei Wuxian's arms or shoving the baby into them. Tears streamed down her face as she similarly lost the ability to say anything.

Jiang Cheng made the decision for her, grabbing both as he pulled them into an embrace.

So many things needed to be said, but first-

"You're coming home."

## Chapter End Notes

The next few chapters will delve more into the aftermath. Important conversations will happen, and important decisions.

Thank you for sticking with this so long! Especially those of you who haven't watched CQL! No judgment here, I sometimes decide whether or not to watch a show based entirely on what watching-the-series fics I can find.

We're almost done with this! I'd work harder on the TGCF and SVSSS but I had to recently switch computers and I'm struggling to find where to read them for free online now that they're being published in English.

# Ripples

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wei Wuxian looked out across the calm water.

“Xian-gege, are you okay?”

He grabbed A-Yuan and sat the boy on his lap so they could share the view. He rested his chin on the top of his head, humming a nonresponse.

Was he okay?

No.

Wen Qing had broken her promise. Jiang Cheng knew about the golden core transfer. Shijie knew. Everyone knew. Jiang Cheng yelled about it. Wei Wuxian was prepared for that. Jiang Cheng pulled him in for another hug and cried. That...he wasn't as prepared for.

Shijie gently explained that Jiang Cheng had only been captured by the Wen because he gave himself up to save him.

Wei Wuxian wasn't sure what to think of that. It was something he was never meant to know.

Just like neither of his siblings were to know about the golden core transfer.

*I'm sorry.*

They'd talked about his first time in the Burial Mounds. They'd talked about why he didn't talk about his disappearance.

*It's not your fault.*

Really, there was a lot of talking all around. More than he expected, when so many things went unsaid between the three of them.

*We love you.*

Wei Wuxian knew there would be no relief in speaking of it. Sharing his suffering didn't lighten the burden. It just made it so that Jiang Cheng and Shijie were more upset. They knew, but what could be done about it? There wasn't a way to give him another golden core. Nor was the matter of the Amulet settled just because he was no longer a villain in the cultivation world's eyes.

*We'll protect you.*

Jiang Cheng promised to stand against the world for him this time, should they come for it.

It was touching. Wei Wuxian squeezed A-Yuan tighter. It felt like Shijie and Jiang Cheng spent hours taking turns telling him how much he was loved. Each time made him believe it a little more.

*You're our brother. We will always want you with us.*

But it didn't change that he was useless.

*You don't have to earn it.*

Shijie told him he didn't have to be of use. That he didn't have to do anything, to prove anything. They were offering him love and protection. The same love and protection he'd given them endlessly.

*Let us protect you from here on.*

Wei Wuxian struggled to put the feeling into words. It grated at him to be the one needing protection. Maybe it was because he knew how much it cost to protect someone in their world. He'd given away his golden core for his brother. He'd given three months of his life to the Burial Mounds for the world. He spent over a year estranged from his family for the Wen Remnants.

He'd been hurt over and over again to protect others.

A shield couldn't protect without taking damage.

Reversing their roles terrified him because he lived that role his entire life. He chose that role because the reverse was unthinkable.

He could still barely think about it.

"Do you like it here, A-Yuan?" Wei Wuxian asked.

It was the kid's turn to hum this time.

"The boats make me sick," A-Yuan declared after a solid minute of thinking.

Wei Wuxian chuckled, "I suppose living on a pier is hard when boats make you sick." He rocked back and forth, earning a giggle, "Where do you want to go then?"

"I want to see Rich-gege's home!" A-Yuan didn't hesitate this time, "You said he lived in the clouds right? No boats there!"

"No boats there," Wei Wuxian echoed.

Lan Zhan...

What to do about Lan Zhan?

Wei Wuxian never thought too long about his feelings for Lan Zhan. At one point, he thought they were soulmates, destined to go through life side by side. At another, he thought they were destined to clash. He wouldn't have minded if Lan Zhan put his sword through his heart.

If it was Lan Zhan, he'd deserve it.

Shijie had tried to speak to him about Lan Zhan, but Wei Wuxian shut it down. He didn't want to hear anything unless he heard it from the man himself. Shijie had a way of seeing the best in people.

She always saw the best in him, after all. Even if he kept bringing them danger.

"But no meat either," Wei Wuxian continued.

A-Yuan gasped, "No meat?"

"Didn't I tell you that?" Wei Wuxian smiled softly, "It's one of their three thousand rules."

The child considered the new information, "Rich-gege bought you meat for lunch."

"Ah, that he did." He also bought him the spiciest foods on the menu when all the food in the Cloud Recesses was bland, "But he wouldn't do it that often at his home."

"So it'd be like our old home," A-Yuan mused.

Old home. By which he meant the Burial Mounds. He nuzzled the child's head. Deprivation could take many forms. He'd have let A-Yuan eat meat every day if he had the power. Now the boy wanted to go somewhere that wouldn't let him, even though they had the means. It resulted in the same thing in the end, meatless meals.

It wasn't completely the same though.

There was a difference between can't and won't. It was hard to tell sometimes what that was.

Would he let others take care of him? Or was it could he?

"Yeah," Wei Wuxian whispered, "Just like our old home."

Lotus Pier would always be home. This was where he'd trained. This was where he formed his golden core. This was where he lived as a cultivator.

The golden core he now lacked. Now, he could only be a demonic cultivator.

And everyone knew that.

Could he train others? Maybe they'd listen to him about theory, but what was the use of lecturing if he couldn't put words to action? How could he teach them the way of the sword when he couldn't even use his without risking fainting?

He couldn't really blame Wen Qing. In a choice between his secret and her family's freedom, there wasn't really a choice. He could blame Nie Huaisang for pressuring her, but no one expected Nie Huaisang to be manipulative. It was hard to prepare for an attack one didn't think was possible.

He sighed, thinking of his friend. It was strange that he came out of this as someone who needed to be protected while Nie Huaisang was finally seen as capable of protecting himself. The overestimated and the underestimated. At least Chifeng-Zun would live long enough to keep him on a better path.

Lotus Pier would always be home, but he wasn't sure he belonged there anymore.

Not with the Amulet still in his possession.

Or maybe that was the idiotic, self-sacrificial part of him talking. Maybe Jiang Cheng and Shijie knew better.

"This was your old, old home, wasn't it?" A-Yuan asked.

"This is where I grew up, for the most part," Wei Wuxian answered.

He wanted to go back to the person he used to be. He wanted to be arrogant, and shameless, to laugh and smile like nothing mattered but his present happiness. He wanted to go back to being the young man who didn't look back, who didn't have regrets. And he tried. He tried to let it all go and just be.

But it was too much. His mistakes, his regrets, his failures...he'd made so many choices knowing that he would pay for them one day.

He created the Amulet, knowing it would be a powerful weapon. He already regretted creating it.

His mood darkened, so he made to stand, holding A-Yuan close, "Let's go find Shijie. Maybe she'll watch you while I take a boat out."

The Wen Remnants were busy rebuilding a home for themselves. Again. He had barely seen Wen Qing at all since they got there. Which was fine by him since he wasn't sure what to say to her. Just like most of Lotus Pier wasn't sure what to say to him.

No one really had much to say to him anymore.

If Jin Guangshan had his way, the entire world would have turned against him. They would have cut him down, cursed his name and his memory.

How was he supposed to find his place in a world that almost destroyed him?

Especially when why they would have destroyed him was still in his possession.

"Alone?" A-Yuan frowned, "You don't have to go alone."

“I know,” Wei Wuxian smiled.

He didn’t have to be alone.

It didn’t mean he didn’t want to be alone.

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Lan Wangji landed in Lotus Pier.

The situation in Koi Tower was finally stable, given a certain definition of stable. Some of the other minor Sect Leaders had tried to calm Sect Leader Qin’s outrage. That gave enough time for word to spread to those being held.

Fearing a mass execution, they took up arms and started to fight.

For Jin Guangshan’s crimes, dozens more were now dead.

One of which was Madam Qin.

Everyone knowing was too much for her. Or perhaps it wasn’t everyone knowing, just her daughter knowing. There were some things that one could pretend to have forgotten. That became impossible the more people who knew it. Even though it wasn’t her fault. Even though she was the victim. Even though she’d done nothing wrong...

Lan Wangji hadn’t sent much warning of his impending visit. He’d been in a hurry.

Madam Qin tried hard to keep her secrets. Once they were out in the open, she turned a knife on herself.

Wei Ying tried hard to keep his secrets. Now they were out in the open.

Jiang Wanyin stood at the entrance, his arms crossed and his expression already displeased.

He bowed anyway, “Jiang-zongzhu.”

“Hanguang-Jun,” Jiang Wanyin returned tightly, “Have you brought us news from Koi Tower?”

“Jin Guangshan is dead,” Lan Wangji said.

“Who killed him?” The young Sect Leader asked.

“Sect Leader Qin,” Sect Leaders Yao and Ouyang were injured trying to prevent him from carrying out his rash action. It was no less than what they deserved. Maybe they would finally learn a lesson in not meddling in the affairs of others.

Jiang Wanyin let out a huff of approval, “How is Jin Zixuan?”

Lan Wangji’s lips tightened. As much of a monster as Jin Guangshan was, he was still Jin Zixuan’s father. The new Jin Sect Leader expected to keep his father imprisoned. When the



case inevitably went to trial, and execution was the verdict reached, Jin Zixuan would have had time to come to terms with this.

What had happened was sudden. Unexpected.

The world was telling Jin Zixuan not to mourn, but surely some part of him needed to.

Just as Lan Wangji would have mourned Wei Ying if Jin Guangshan's plan succeeded and Wei Ying died reviled by the world.

But Jin Zixuan was always acutely aware of the opinions of others. He was trying harder to ignore them and do the right thing, but there was no clear right thing for his situation.

"How is Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji asked. He didn't have to tell Jiang Wanyin grief was complicated.

Jiang Wanyin grimaced, "Tired."

"Tired?" He echoed.

"Nothing broken can be fixed quickly," The young Sect Leader turned away, "He took out a boat if you want to talk to him yourself."

It was a relief to be dismissed from formalities.

Broken. That described so many of them in various ways. It also described their relationships with each other. Fixing his relationship with Wei Ying needed to start as soon as possible, but he held no illusions it would go quickly.

It was easy to spot the lone boat amongst the lotuses from high above.

It was much harder to disturb the figure resting in it.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Ying offered him a smile, "Have you come to take me back to Gusu?"

Lan Wangji stored his blade, "Only if you want."

His eyes lit up, "Only if I want? Is Hanguang-Jun offering me whatever I desire?"

"Whatever you desire," He agreed easily as he sank into the seat opposite him.

Wei Ying laughed, sitting up straighter, "Ah, Lan Zhan, you have such a thick face now. A few years ago..." His amusement wavered, "You would have reacted differently."

The boat rocked at their abrupt motions, sending ripples out across the water.

Lan Wangji waited for it all to settle. Then he carefully removed his forehead ribbon, "A few years ago, I tied this around your wrist."

"Yes, because your family's wards are powerful," Wei Ying's eyes flickered between meeting his own, and the ribbon now loose in his hands, "And you've always tried to protect others,

when you could.”

“No,” He said.

“No?” His love echoed.

Lan Wangji moved closer and once again tied it around Wei Ying’s wrist, “The forehead ribbon means to regulate oneself. We are taught that we can only let go of all regulations when we are with the one we love and cherish.” He brought his wrist up and kissed where he’d tied it, “I meant it then, and I mean it now. You are who I love and cherish.”

Wei Ying’s breath hitched, but he said nothing.

Was it too much? It was nothing more than the truth. Given how many misunderstandings sprang up between them, he wouldn’t shy away from the truth anymore.

Finally, Wei Ying let out a breathless laugh, “Back then...I really wanted to sleep with you.”

Lan Wangji supposed that was an answer, even if it wasn’t the one he was hoping for.

“Wait,” His love gripped his wrist, “I like you. Or in other words, I fancy you,” He moved closer, leaning over the bench between them, “I love you, I want you. I...whatever you.”

There was no humor in his eyes. Just genuine sincerity.

Lan Wangji closed the distance between them, letting go of his reservations. He kissed his love the way he had wanted to since that first infuriating fight on the rooftops. The boat rocked violently as he pulled Wei Ying closer to him, all but in his lap. The kiss was reciprocated passionately.

They’d almost lost this.

His grip tightened at the thought, and Wei Ying broke the kiss, “Ah, Lan-er-gege, you have to be careful. I’m...”

Not as strong as he used to be. Without his golden core, and without the resentment of the Burial Mounds, he wasn’t as strong. At least physically.

“Not weak,” Lan Wangji corrected, because Wei Ying was anything but weak. There was no one who had endured more, no one with his resilience.

Still, now that he was more subdued, Lan Wangji could see what Jiang Wanyin meant. Wei Ying was tired. Of what? He wasn’t sure. He desperately hoped it wasn’t of living in a world where so many hated him and so few loved him.

“You can’t marry me,” Wei Ying drew back.

“I can,” Lan Wangji replied.

“Well, then...” His love waved a hand, “I can’t marry you.”

“Why?” He caught the hand.

“I won’t stop demonic cultivation,” Wei Ying said, “I can’t...I just can’t.”

“I won’t stop you from doing what you must,” Lan Wangji promised.

He’d hoped that with safety, Wei Ying could give up demonic cultivation. But safety was subjective. Wei Ying would never settle for living behind walls. He would want to go out, to help people, to fight to protect them. He’d do it even if he had no power at all, because it was simply his nature.

Compared to the prospect of losing him entirely, Lan Wangji wouldn’t raise any issue with demonic cultivation. Not when most of his concerns about the detriments were assuaged.

“I’m not going to live as long as you,” Wei Ying tried again.

“There are never guarantees,” Lan Wangji could be killed. Anyone could be killed. What mattered was not wasting the present.

His love floundered, “I have...unfinished business.”

“Then we’ll finish it together.”

Wei Ying was quiet for a long time, “And if I asked you to stay behind?”

“I want to be by your side,” Lan Wangji insisted, “Always.”

“I thought we were doing whatever I wanted,” It wasn’t a joke this time.

If Wei Ying told him to go away, what would Lan Wangji do?

A week ago, he would have left. He’d have regretted it, but he would have listened.

Now, he wasn’t sure.

Wei Ying sighed, leaning back more. It saved him from having to respond, “Ah, that was unfair to you, Lan Zhan. How can you do whatever I want when I’m not sure what I want to do?” He swung his legs around the bench and leaned back, closing the distance Lan Wangji was about to protest.

He let him lay on him.

“Rest,” Lan Wangji murmured, “We have time.”

Wei Ying looked up at him, “Do we?”

“Yes.”

At least for the present moment.

They loved and were loved in return. It was more than he dared to hope for.

They were both aware that too many changes at once created instability. As much as he hoped the cultivation world learned something from all this, he also knew that every time progress was made, there was inevitably a push back from those hiding behind tradition.

Just as he held still, waiting for the boat to stop rocking, for the water to settle around them again, Lan Wangji could wait for the world to settle again.

Wei Ying made himself comfortable, “I don’t know if I can stay yet, but A-Yuan wants to see Cloud Recesses.”

“Hm?” Lan Wangji ran a hand down his hair.

“He gets sick on boats,” His love closed his eyes, “Boats, of all things. He never got sick once at the Burial Mounds, but the second we put him on a boat...it was terrible, Lan Zhan. And Popo said he isn’t going to grow out of it either.”

“A radish, not a lotus,” He agreed.

Wei Ying laughed, “Not a lotus.” His eyes opened a crack, “Do you think if he’s raised in the clouds they will think him too close to a sun?”

Lan Wangji shook his head, “The clouds hide the sun.”

“Unless the sun burns them away.”

“Even then, they return.”

Focusing on others was what Wei Ying did. What would it take for him to finally decide to be selfish?

“Very reliable, the clouds,” Wei Ying teased.

“Hm.”

He would always have this moment. Whatever else may come.

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It was strange to be expected to do things.

Nie Huaisang had always wished for those closest to him to know he was useful, but it was another to actually be put to work.

Maybe it was just because there was so much to be done.

His idiot older brother publicly proposed to Qin Su. Luckily San-ge intervened. Yes, Nie Huaisang knew his brother’s heart was in the right place. A marriage to a major Sect Leader would ensure Qin Su a life of comfort where no one would dare speak poorly of her to her face. And the Nie Sect would respond violently to any disrespect they detected.

But Nie Huaisang was also aware of the ulterior motives. Da-ge had no problem offering marriage to a young woman because he still thought he would die young. Qin Su would have plenty of time to find a husband she actually loved once his older brother inevitably succumbed to their family's curse.

Which really meant his brother was setting things up for Nie Huaisang to take care of Qin Su as his brother's future widow.

Da-ge wasn't going to die. Therefore, he couldn't marry her.

Er-ge was still struggling to come to terms with his own problems, and Hanguang-Jun had disappeared. Well, they all knew he was at Lotus Pier with Wei Wuxian, but they weren't really advertising it.

He didn't feel bad about sending Er-ge home with his uncle. Too many people were looking his way while muttering about a new Chief Cultivator. Er-ge wasn't ready for it. Out of sight was out of mind, and with a majority of the Jin Sect who would have gone to trial now dead, they didn't need him there for a trial.

The problem of the Wen Remnants wasn't really a problem anymore so Nie Huaisang was very content to leave what was happening in Yunmeng to Jiang Cheng.

Especially since he, somehow, ended up as emotional support for Jin Zixuan as he officially started running the Jin Sect. Nie Huaisang definitely didn't ask for this role. But while Jiang Yanli made Jin Zixuan less of a mess, Koi Tower wasn't exactly the safest place. Fresh blood meant new vendettas, and San-ge only knew so much about everyone's secrets.

Nie Huaisang tried to push MianMian back into the role of helping Jin Zixuan function, but she declined. She was focused on Qin Su and planned to go with her to the Qin Sect for her mother's funeral.

He didn't blame her. Except he sort of did.

She blamed him right back. After all, this entire viewing of the past was his plan. That he was unable to foresee the fallout...

"What do you think, Nie Huaisang?" Jin Zixuan turned to him.

"What?" Nie Huaisang had honestly not been paying attention this time.

Madam Jin scowled at him, "About Jin Guangyao."

"I thought we'd agreed to trust him for now," He evaded. He could point out that they sort of needed him, but that was only temporary.

Eventually, Jin Zixuan would get his bearings. He'd get over the shock of his Sect's crimes and find people within it he could trust. Jiang Yanli would come back, and he'd have someone he could go to with his residual grief and fears. He'd have a son to focus on, a reminder of why he had to put so much work into creating a better world.

“He has been helpful,” Jin Zixuan grimaced, “But...”

“Good deeds and bad deeds are hard to balance,” Nie Huaisang opened his fan, “Especially when bad deeds have been disguised as good deeds.”

“Yes,” The new Jin Sect Leader said helplessly.

“San-ge’s always wanted recognition. He wants a place in our world, and he didn’t care who he hurt to secure it,” It wasn’t his fault that his life could be so easily upended. Nor was it his fault that Jin Guangshan put a price on security, “If you’re planning to denounce him, or exile him permanently, you might as well execute him. He’d let you.”

They both remember how close Hanguang-Jun came to killing him.

“Permanently,” Jin Zixuan caught on, “I could banish him temporarily.”

There was too much attention on them now to do nothing about San-ge. He considered sending a message to Lotus Pier for their opinion, but at this point, they deserved to settle down.

The satisfaction of Jin Guangshan’s life had already been claimed by another.

They’d known without Jin Guangshan to look like a bigger monster, something had to happen to San-ge.

“I wouldn’t call it a banishment at all then,” Nie Huaisang considered the options, “Give him a task. Something that will take time, take him away. Say...finding other siblings you may have and assisting other women your father wronged. Have him return to where he started, but instead of climbing over others, have him help them rise as well.”

Maybe it would help. The past couldn’t be changed, but it could be confronted. Maybe San-ge would find peace through helping other women the way he was unable to help his own mother. Maybe he’d get addicted to the high regard the other children would give him as their benefactor, just as he so desperately needed Er-ge’s approval.

He hadn’t missed the way San-ge looked at Jin Ling.

“Is it wise to trust him with potential competition?” Madam Jin asked.

“I’m sure he will treat them kinder than you,” Nie Huaisang replied, “Besides, it would be suspicious for him to not find more children or wronged women.”

“It’s an honorable mission,” Jin Zixuan leaned against one hand.

“Look, Jin-xiong,” It felt strange to call him that, but it’s what he always called his friends, “There will never be a perfect solution. Sometimes...you just have to do something and hope it works out.”

“Like you did all this?” Madam Jin glowered at him.

Nie Huaisang snapped his fan shut, "Would you rather I have done nothing?"

This was another thing he'd have to get used to. The people who blamed him for the events of the past few days. As if it were his fault they were forced to face their faults. As if he could have known...

He'd done nothing wrong. He wouldn't apologize for any of it.

But he would help.

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Wei Wuxian got to show Lan Zhan around Lotus Pier. He took him to officially meet Jiangshushu and Madam Yu. It was the first time he went to their memorial tablet since his return, but Lan Zhan didn't need to know that. Shijie made them both her lotus and pork rib soup. He even got Lan Zhan to try some of the alcohol made from lotuses.

Jiang Cheng officially banned Lan Zhan from consuming anything alcoholic because of that.

It was a memorable night to say the least.

For so long, the thought of Lan Zhan made him conflicted. He forgot how happy he felt to just be in his company. He forgot he could be this happy.

"We have another letter from Zewu-Jun," Shijie informed him as they settled down for breakfast.

Lan Zhan stilled.

"What does he want now?" Jiang Cheng grumbled moodily. Wen Qing flicked him and some of his moodiness abated.

There were a few matters Wei Wuxian had to speak to her about, and they shared meals, but that was about it when it came to their interactions. She was busy arranging her new domain to her satisfaction. She no longer had to worry about him, or hide his secrets. She also had Jiang Cheng now.

Wen Ning sat next to her. He'd taken to the younger Jiang disciples, as all young men loved a challenge and there was no one stronger than Wen Ning. As long as he had his sister, Wen Ning would be happy.

"Who is Zewu-Jun?" A-Yuan leaned closer to whisper to him.

"Lan Zhan's brother," Wei Wuxian whispered back.

"Rich-gege has a brother?" The child now leaned towards the other man, "Does he look like you?"

"Some call them the Twin Jades," Shijie kindly answered, "He was simply wondering when Wangji would return to Gusu, and if he should prepare for a wedding."

Lan Zhan glanced at him, and Wei Wuxian shrugged, “We’ve been talking about visiting.”

“I want to see the clouds,” A-Yuan interjected.

“And you should go back to Jin Zixuan before Nie-xiong has a meltdown, A-Jie,” Jiang Cheng added, “We can come up with a visitation schedule soon.”

It was funny how many letters Jiang Cheng was getting. Half of Zewu-Jun’s correspondence was aimed at Lan Zhan. The other half was aimed at getting to know the Jiang Sect Leader better. Which made sense, given that his two sworn brothers had lied to him. If Lan Xichen had somehow befriended Nie Mingjue, then he’d befriend Jiang Cheng.

It was also why he kept bringing up visiting Cloud Recesses. Wei Wuxian understood what it meant to be disappointed in those closest to him. To be disappointed in himself. If he hadn’t had Jiang Cheng and Shijie and Lan Zhan...he wouldn’t have been able to stand the stillness, the inaction.

All Zewu-Jun had in the clouds was his uncle and Lan Qiren wasn’t an outwardly loving person.

“He also says...” Shijie trailed off, “That Lianfeng-Zun may stop by on his way to Yunping.”

It was an interesting punishment. Poetic. Wei Wuxian would have been shocked at the peacock’s ingenuity if he wasn’t certain Nie Huaisang was behind it. It removed Jin Guangyao from power and influence, but still let him keep his reputation.

“I can speak to him,” Shijie offered immediately, “Whatever message he has-”

“Can be left with me,” Jiang Cheng argued.

“As long as it’s not me,” Wen Qing grimaced.

“Who’s Lianfeng-Zun?” A-Yuan whispered.

“No one you need to concern yourself with,” Lan Zhan answered.

Wei Wuxian laughed, “He’s a complicated man who is about to start a very important job.” He pushed around his food, “And I have a feeling whatever business he has here has to do with me.”

Lan Zhan grabbed his wrist, “Don’t meet with him alone.”

“How can we speak freely otherwise?”

In the end, Jiang Cheng sullenly stood by his side as they waited for Lianfeng-Zun’s approach. Wei Wuxian couldn’t muster up the same anger. Especially when he saw the man again, donned in tan robes. No adornment of any Sect. He wasn’t even wearing anything on his head. No sign of the servant of the Jin Sect, or the Vice General of the Nie Sect.



Just a man.

“Jiang-zongzhu,” Lianfeng-Zun bowed, “Wei-gongzi.”

“Lianfeng-Zun,” Wei Wuxian managed a smile as he returned the bow.

Jiang Cheng said nothing.

“I will not stay long,” The smaller man rose, pulling a scroll from his bag, “I’ve compiled all the information the Jin Sect gathered on Xue Yang.”

“I thought Chifeng-Zun was planning to take over the pursuit,” Wei Wuxian nonetheless accepted the information.

“Now that it’s a pursuit and not a recruitment,” Jiang Cheng commented.

Lianfeng-Zun’s polite expression tightened, “His motives are unclear, but I’ve always had the impression he refused the Jin Sect’s offer because of you, Wei-gongzi. As long as the Jin Sect was your apparent enemy, he would not join.”

Wei Wuxian assumed the same. Xue Yang relied on tricks, on manipulations. In a direct fight between the two of them, “He knows I’m more powerful.”

Lianfeng-Zun stepped back, “That may not matter if he learns you intend to destroy the Amulet.”

“You are not using yourself as bait,” Jiang Cheng turned his glare on him.

Wei Wuxian held up his hands, “It’s just something to keep in mind, I’m sure.” Because the Amulet would need to be destroyed, even if there was no pressure for that to be immediately. He shook the scroll, “Thank you.”

Lianfeng-Zun bowed again, “Then I will be leaving.”

Wei Wuxian returned the formality, “To Yunping, right?”

He was tempted to ask why. He could have started his search in Lanling. There were plenty of brothels that could have kept him closer to his sphere of influence. No one would bat an eye if it took years to right all of Jin Guangshan’s wrongs there.

“Yes,” Lianfeng-Zun turned away, “There is a friend of my mother’s I want to recruit to assist me. I’m sure you understand.”

Wei Wuxian couldn’t find any words to add to that. He just watched the man walk away.

It wasn’t that he’d forgotten his desire to meet Baoshan Sanren. It was just another thing that became impossible after the golden core transfer. He’d supposedly given up his chance of meeting her by sending Jiang Cheng to her. He couldn’t search for her without risking his deception being discovered.

Now that his deception was well-known...

He'd always wanted a tangible connection to his mother. He spent so much of his life under Madam Yu, where any mention of her was forbidden. He dreamed of the freedom to seek out her mentor. To seek out the place where she trained. To meet her fellow disciples and hear stories. To see what she was like from the only people who could tell him.

He joined the quest for the Yin Iron because Lan Yi mentioned Baoshan Sanren.

Would he be able to find her now? When he'd committed the same mistake as Lan Yi? Was he even worthy of climbing her mountain?

"What did he say to you?" Lan Zhan demanded.

When had Lan Zhan gotten there?

"He reminded me of something I'd forgotten," Wei Wuxian murmured.

They didn't take it well when he told them he wanted to leave.

Not that he expected them to.

"Do you have any idea where to start?" Jiang Cheng demanded.

"Xiao Xingchen," Wei Wuxian answered.

"No one knows where Xiao Xingchen is," His brother argued, "There are only rumors."

"Then I'll find Song Lan," His mind raced, "With him, I'm sure I'll find Xiao Xingchen."

"He didn't tell you where Baoshan Sanren was," Lan Zhan tried.

"There was war on the horizon," Wei Wuxian dismissed.

More people got involved. More reasons were thrown at him. It was dangerous for him to wander around with the Amulet. As if he wasn't capable of defending himself from anything short of an army. They didn't want him to miss anything. As if he wasn't capable of sending letters or dropping by for visits.

No reason stuck.

"This is something you have to do," Shijie finally admitted.

Wei Wuxian just nodded.

"I'll go with you," Lan Zhan volunteered.

"No," He looked at Wen Qing, who frowned and turned away, "We've been discussing it, and we all think it's best for A-Yuan to make the Cloud Recesses his home. Of course, I'll come with you to make sure he's settled, and only after that..."

Would he leave.

“Not forever,” Jiang Cheng said.

“Not forever,” Wei Wuxian promised, “Just...I need to do this. For myself.”

For once in his life.

“I don’t like this,” Jiang Cheng grumbled.

Wei Wuxian put a hand on his shoulder, “When have you ever liked anything I did?”

Besides, it wasn’t like he was leaving immediately. Maybe wandering around for a while would make him ready to settle down. Even if he didn’t find Baoshan Sanren...

The longer he thought about it, the more certain he was that he had to do this.

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A-Yuan loved Cloud Recesses.

He loved the rabbits. He loved the music. He loved his new uncle, and his new granduncle. He liked how clean it was. He could wear white without it getting dirty. No one yelled at him because no one yelled. Uncle Xichen also read him some of the rules on the wall, which he liked. When all the rules were out there, he couldn’t break them accidentally.

Not like it had been with the people in gold.

There were a lot more kids his age too! He already made a friend named Jingyi, who Rich-gege said could come over and play with the rabbits whenever he wanted. And whenever they went down the mountain to Gusu the townspeople were so nice to them.

Not like it had been at their old home.

He was even starting to like his new name. Lan Yuan. They told him that he’d have another name given to him soon! Just like Rich-gege and Xian-gege!

And if he ever wanted to go back to the boat place, Rich-gege and Uncle Xichen were willing to fly him over.

The only thing that wasn’t perfect was that Xian-gege wasn’t staying.

A-Yuan crossed his arms and pouted as Rich-gege helped load stuff onto a donkey.

“Once all this is settled, I’ll return,” Xian-gege promised, kissing Rich-gege.

“Hm.”

At least Rich-gege was just as unhappy as him.

Xian-gege picked him up and pressed a kiss to his cheek, “I’ll be sure to write. Learn to read soon, okay?”

A-Yuan nodded, “You’re coming back, right?”

“As long as the sea is bound to wash up on the sand, and stars are above you, we will meet again,” Xian-gege promised, touching his cheek but staring into Rich-gege's eyes, “Someday.”

“Someday,” Rich-gege echoed.

“And then we’ll be together everyday.”

Xian-gege passed him over to Rich-gege, smiling at both of them.

Then he grabbed the donkey’s lead and started walking away.

A-Yuan wanted to ask Rich-gege to go after him. He wanted Rich-gege to do something. But after watching him for a few minutes, he turned to go back to Cloud Recesses.

To go home.

They'd meet again. Xian-gege promised.

## Chapter End Notes

I'm very receptive to criticism when I'm beginning a story. The closer I get to the end, the less I want to hear it because there is less I can do to fix it. It just stresses me out. So please, if you're unhappy with this story, just unsubscribe, close the tab, and forget about it.

There are two more chapters, so please don't think this is the end!

Thank you all so much for your support!

# Make Things Right

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The road to recovery was not an easy one.

Nie Mingjue's hand shook. No matter how hard he tried to stop it, the shaking continued. He felt weak in a way he hadn't since he was a child. But for the first time in a long time, his mind was completely his own. There was no foreign anger, no murderous intent he needed to keep control of.

There was nothing for him to fight. Not in his head, and not with his body.

"Wei-xiong's understanding of resentment is truly unparalleled," Huaisang commented from where he was working. He pointedly ignored the shaking.

Nie Mingjue sank into the seat next to him. He was grateful to have his brother back by his side. Huaisang chose to stay at Koi Tower to help Jin Zixuan rather than attend Madam Qin's funeral, so they'd been separated for a time.

The funeral ended up being a small affair. Most people were too cowardly to dare face Sect Leader Qin in his grief. Given how well he'd made his wrath known at Koi Tower, Nie Mingjue had been all the more determined to attend. His presence as Lady Qin's friend ensured no one spoke poorly of her, though he could hear the whispers of it behind their backs.

He knew Huaisang wouldn't approve, but he offered her a reprieve in the Unclean Realm.

Lady Qin accepted.

He didn't ask her why. He understood how hard it was to live in a place where a parent had died. He remembered how angry he'd gotten during the arguments of Huaisang's suitability to be the next Nie Sect Leader. He also remembered how Huaisang disappeared during those arguments, only to be found up a tree trying to draw a bird or something else absurd.

Lady Qin didn't need to listen to people debate her worthiness for anything. Maybe it was Lady Luo who convinced her to take up his offer of sanctuary, but he was glad for their presence.

When Lady Qin came to him asking what weapon he thought suited her, he took her to the armory and spent half the day helping her figure it out.

When, a few days after that, she approached him asking for a recommendation for someone to help her use it, he and Lady Luo took to overseeing her training personally.

It wasn't as though there were any new leads on Xue Yang.

The world kept moving. Nie Mingjue learned to delegate, to not push himself closer to a qi deviation. He hadn't drawn Baxia since returning home.

Then Wei Wuxian decided to leave Lotus Pier. Madam Jiang returned to Koi Tower, which meant Huaisang returned to the Unclean Realm. His brother had barely unpacked before Wen Qing arrived with a Jiang escort to present her findings. Then Huaisang forcibly took over the duties of Sect Leader so Nie Mingjue could go and heal.

It was impossible to hide Wen Qing and his sessions from his visitors, who quickly sided with Huaisang in ensuring he didn't strain himself.

"I don't know how you can read his handwriting," Lady Qin murmured from Huaisang's other side.

Nie Mingjue looked down at the papers, "What is all this?"

"I asked Wen Qing to bring all of Wei-xiong's experiments and notes," Huaisang continued reading, separating the papers into piles.

"Dare I ask?" He accepted a cup of water from Lady Luo.

"Simply correcting the account doesn't fix Wei-xiong's reputation," His younger brother informed him, "I don't just want him to be innocent. I want him to be appreciated. Maybe even celebrated. I want his name to be spoken of in awe."

"As it should be," Lady Luo agreed.

"Nie Huaisang was thinking of compiling Wei Wuxian's notes into a book," Lady Qin continued the explanation, "A guidebook on demonic entities for cultivators."

Nie Mingjue nodded, "As long as it's not a guidebook on demonic cultivation."

Not that Huaisang needed his permission to do anything.

It was an interesting new dynamic, to say the least. Huaisang no longer hid his cunning around him. While he would pretend to be indecisive in front of others, Nie Mingjue understood it was all just a deception. The rest of the world thought Nie Mingjue was giving his younger brother more duties so that he wouldn't have the free time to accidentally create more trouble.

The Unclean Realm knew that their Sect Heir was doing more so the Sect Leader could do less.

"I'll leave out all the interesting bits," Huaisang promised, "I'm aiming to make this a classification system, so that village leaders can be better able to inform cultivation Sects what they need protection from."

That would be useful. No one before could be considered an expert on demonic entities. Everyone was always more concerned about their feats being considered impressive than

being honest about the danger levels. As much as they distrusted Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation, it did make him an expert on the subject.

If he put into words a way to distinguish between demonic entities that civilians could understand, it would make night hunts easier.

"And you can increase your marketability," Lady Luo reminded him.

"And so I can increase the marketability," His younger brother agreed.

"You're going to sell his work?" Nie Mingjue frowned.

"If I just shared it freely it would look cheap," Huaisang huffed, "You give something value by making it valuable." He lowered his voice, "Besides, it would be nice for Wei-xiong to have some money of his own."

Instead of depending on a Sect for his finances.

He was learning himself the value of depending on others, but it also made him appreciate his former independence.

"I think the Compass of Evil will be the main source of profit," Lady Luo slid over a compass.

Nie Mingjue stared at it, "What makes it evil?"

"It tracks resentment," The rogue cultivator answered, "Perfect for those who want to hunt something, and for those who wish to avoid danger."

They started to discuss the matters of starting a business. The book would be easy to produce and circulate. The compass was much more temperamental. It would likely have to be made by cultivators. Huaisang wasn't sure if that Sect should be the Nie Sect, since there was a chance their sabers would throw off testing.

His brother glanced at him when Lady Qin suggested the Lan Sect.

Nie Mingjue still exchanged letters with Xichen. His own recovery was slow going, but the talismans Wei Wuxian created to siphon the resentment from the sabers was going faster. It would just be a few more weeks and they would be weakened enough to no longer need the traditional containment methods.

Then they could remove the corpses in the walls. They could give them a proper burial, give them peace.

Then things would be made right there.

He could make things right in other aspects of his life after.

"Perhaps the Jiang Sect," Nie Mingjue said, "Until their use has been proven."

He didn't miss the irony that a demonic cultivator was revolutionizing cultivation.

The lure flags were already saving lives. Before, on a night hunt, they had to fight whatever evil was wreaking havoc where it was. The ability to choose their battlefield meant they avoided civilian casualties and property damage. They could also choose when to set up the flags, meaning they were always ready for fights now.

With the addition of the guide and compass, there was no denying that more lives would be saved.

There was never an end to fighting in the cultivation world, but there would be a new efficiency.

That, more than any cure from Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian, kept him from using Baxia.

Huaisang considered it, then shrugged, "I was planning to ask Hanguang-Jun to help once I got the original notes more organized. Figured he would want to help."

The collaboration was also new. Not collaboration out of necessity, but because the leaders of the Sects genuinely respected each other. It was what he and Xichen had hoped to establish when they'd sworn brotherhood, but didn't end up happening. It was the beginning of what he hoped would be a long lasting peace between all the Sects.

"He's a father now," Lady Luo pointed out.

Huaisang sighed dramatically, "Don't remind me. The Lan and Jin Sect both have heirs of a new generation, and Jiang Cheng will marry Wen Qing soon so they'll probably have kids too. The Nie Sect is falling behind."

"Does that matter?" Nie Mingjue wondered.

"I mean, I don't think anyone wants to arrange marriages, but it'd be nice if the Nie Sect's alliances with the other major Sects weren't depending on our stunning personalities," His brother leaned back, "A smaller age gap means more potential for friendships that can lead to something more than friendship."

"Children aren't strategy moves," Lady Qin flicked his arm, "Besides, Nie Mingjue is going to live a long life." She glanced at him, "There's plenty of time."

He met her gaze. His offer of marriage still hung between them. He'd never formally retracted it. Nor had she formally responded.

But as Huaisang said, there should be friendship first before there could be more.

"Plenty of time," He echoed.

There was a future he never imagined possible, and the pieces of it were sitting around this table.

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When Lan Xichen thought about uncles, he could only think about Uncle.

Uncle, who he remembered holding Wangji as an infant. Uncle, who sat with him and taught him how to read. Uncle, who watched over his early training. Uncle was stern, but Uncle was there.

For a boy whose parents couldn't be there, Uncle was everything.

Now, Lan Xichen himself was an uncle.

He loved A-Yuan. It was impossible not to. He'd been prepared to have to go against his clan's elders to have A-Yuan stated as Wangji's heir, but Uncle already swayed them. Since Lan Xichen couldn't see himself marrying, much less having children, it was likely A-Yuan would grow up to be the next Lan Sect Leader.

He thought that might raise a fuss, but it almost felt like nobody made the connection between the Wen child in Wei Wuxian's memories and Lan Yuan. Yes, they didn't advertise it, and they changed the character used, but the main rumor he heard was that Lan Yuan was a war orphan Wangji saw potential in.

Given the two people he knew who were very good at manipulating rumors, he didn't believe that was luck.

However, they still wanted to put as much distance between Wen Yuan and his nephew. So before they officially announced him as Wangji's heir, they needed to decide a courtesy name.

Once Wen Qing gave her permission, Lan Xichen came up with a few ideas. Wangji sought Wei Wuxian's thoughts. The traveling man replied that they should invite Jiang Yanli to make the decision. He wrote that it would only be fair, but didn't elaborate on why.

Jiang Yanli was the sister of his future brother-in-law and therefore family. She had also been much more receptive to exchanging letters than her younger brother. It didn't surprise him when she accepted the invitation.

It did surprise him that her husband tagged along.

"Thank you for coming," Lan Xichen smiled at the married couple, and their young son.

He kept an eye on A-Yuan's reaction. This was the first time he'd see someone from the Jin Sect since his rescue from Qiongqi Pass. Wangji had spoken to A-Yuan about what he remembered from that time, and it wasn't much. The color gold and the fear of it seemed to be the worst of it.

A-Yuan did eye Jin Zixuan suspiciously, but quickly lit up at the sight of Jiang Yanli and her son.

"Auntie!" He darted forward to hug her leg.

They could work on manners later. Not that family needed to be held to such formalities.

Not anymore.

“Hello, A-Yuan,” Jiang Yanli knelt down, “I’m happy to see you too.”

“I want to hold LingLing!” A-Yuan looked towards Wangji for assistance.

He wasn’t quite big enough to properly hold a young infant, so they quickly moved inside. Wangji sat with A-Yuan on his lap, and the Jin Sect heir on the child’s lap. His brother made sure to keep the infant’s head supported, even as A-Yuan delighted in the babbling.

“You didn’t have to come all this way, Jin Zixuan,” Lan Xichen forced himself to look away from the sight and talk to their guests.

“Believe me, I know,” Jin Zixuan grimaced, “But it’s only fair.”

“Wei Wuxian wrote as much,” He paused, “Is there some tradition we should be aware of when it comes to names?”

Jiang Yanli laughed, “Hardly. It’s just…”

“Wei Wuxian gave A-Ling his courtesy name,” Jin Zixuan blurted out.

Lan Xichen searched his memory, “Rulan?”

“I can’t imagine where he came up with Lan,” The Jin Sect Leader grumbled, his gaze flickering to Wangji.

That was…honestly so sweet. If he had any lingering doubts about Wei Wuxian’s feelings for his brother, that would have been enough to dispel them. The oldest child of his beloved sister, named for the love of his life. He took a sip of the prepared tea to hide his smile.

“I’m honored,” Wangji deadpanned, “I will ensure the Lan Sect uses no other name.”

Jin Zixuan scowled, “Then you better let me pick A-Yuan’s courtesy name.”

It would be fair.

“I assume we aren’t following the same pattern,” Lan Xichen carefully said. It would be fair to let Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli pick A-Yuan’s courtesy name, but he drew the line at letting A-Yuan’s courtesy name reflect the Jin Sect.

“If we’re naming him after someone here, it’s going to be A-Li,” Jin Zixuan promised.

“I just wanted to see him in Cloud Recesses,” Jiang Yanli bit her lip, “Are there any Lan naming traditions I should be aware of, Xichen?”

Lan Xichen was an uncle now. He’d focused so much on that he’d almost forgotten he now had a sister. Jiang Yanli was always so caring, so kind, of course she would pick up on what Da-ge called him and decide to emulate it to be more familial.

Some of his emotions must have shown on his face, because she leaned closer to place a hand on his arm, “Forgive me if I overstepped.”

“No,” He placed his hand over hers, “I’m simply unused to it.”

He’d distanced himself from both of his sworn brothers. Distance granted perspective. A new perspective would help with his judgment. When they were ready to come together again, he would see them for who they were rather than who he’d hoped they were. It’s what they all deserved.

“Hm,” She stared into his eyes, “Perhaps A-Huan.”

“It’ll fit right in,” Jin Zixuan commented, “A-Yuan. A-Huan.”

A-Xuan. A-Xian. A-Cheng. She never held back her affection for her family.

“We’re here for A-Yuan’s name, not mine,” Nonetheless, he didn’t let go as he explained how naming usually went in the Lan Sect.

His plan had been to befriend Jiang Wanyin. Assuming a familial relation seemed a step too far.

Then Wangji placed little Jin Ling in his arms. The baby gripped his offered finger, and all he could think about was his courtesy name. The Jin Sect heir was named after the Lan Sect heir by a member of the Jiang Clan. They were already interconnected.

“I can’t wait for you to be old enough to attend the lectures here, Rulan,” Lan Xichen whispered.

They didn’t end up deciding on a name then, but that just meant more discussions later.

They wanted the name to be the right one.

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Sisi was laughing at him.

“Can you go out to buy the supplies or not?” Jin Guangyao (Meng Yao? He wasn’t sure anymore) snapped.

“You used to be better at hiding your anger,” His mother’s friend teased, but took the money and left their room at the inn.

“Look where that got me,” He muttered, fiddling with the blankets around the child.

Another brother. Mo Xuanyu. He pressed a hand to the younger boy’s forehead. He still felt too warm to the touch, and he could feel the sweat gathering on his brow. He tried to decide whether or not he could wait for Sisi to come back before sending her to find a doctor, or if he should just yell until one of the inn’s servants came.

Jin Guangyao knew this whole mission was designed to keep him away from Koi Tower. He took it seriously, because he couldn't not, but so far he'd mostly been helping women.

This was the first child.

Perhaps he should have prioritized finding children first. A bastard was only as valuable as their father. With Jin Guangshan being revealed as the monster that he was...well, many of the young women who had one of his children because they foolishly believed he would come back for them also realized the truth.

Apparently, Mo Xuanyu's birth mother fell ill at the news. She never recovered. Given how her half-sister treated Mo Xuanyu, maybe she wasn't given a chance to recover. It wouldn't surprise him if a doctor was never called.

Jin Guangyao didn't investigate. He saw a shivering child in the stables who didn't understand why everyone hated him and took him. He didn't even bother to test if they were actually related.

Was this what would have happened to him if his own mother ever found out the truth about Jin Guangshan?

He took a deep breath, held it, then let it out slowly.

This was exactly what Huaisang wanted. He wanted him to look at the women he was helping and let it heal the part of him that still hurt for his mother. That was actually pleasant. With every woman he helped rehome or ruin whatever man was stringing her along, he felt like he learned more about who he was.

The second part of this he had put it out of his mind and didn't let himself dwell on.

Finding the other bastard children and helping them...it was meant to heal the hurt child within himself. The child that lashed out against any perceived insult. The child that was never shown how to share, only how to possess. The child that never learned there was more to the world than himself.

Knowing that objectively didn't make it any less effective.

He called a servant to bring him a bath.

Get the child clean and check him for injuries.

Start there, and leave the next step for when he got there.

Mo Xuanyu was exceptionally dirty. He cataloged every injury for later treatment. He also spent way too long looking at his face. He wondered if he would grow up to look like Zixuan or himself. Maybe, if he was lucky, he'd look like Qin Su.

Sisi returned quickly, and handed him a clean set of robes roughly Mo Xuanyu's size.

"Are you going to send him to Koi Tower?" She asked.

It seemed her amusement at his panicked kidnapping had faded.

“I’m not sure,” Jin Guangyao admitted.

Going to Koi Tower had set him on a dark path. Being kicked down those steps by his father...it only made him more determined to climb them. It fanned the flame of his ambitions to new heights. It taught him that even in high society, one had to be cruel.

Going to Koi Tower changed him. Not for the better.

Koi Tower was still Koi Tower, whether Jin Zixuan was in charge or Jin Guangshan. No one would be able to gain favor with Jin Zixuan by mistreating bastards, but as long as Madam Jin was there people would try to gain her favor. He didn’t think that would ever change, not after Jin Guangyao proved her right about how dangerous bastards could be.

They may have reached a detente, but Mo Xuanyu was so young. Even if she wasn’t outwardly antagonistic, she wouldn’t be welcoming. That was just as damaging.

He couldn’t ditch the kid at an orphanage or another Sect either. He was old enough to remember whatever stories his mother told him about their father. He’d go to Koi Tower eventually.

The only option that didn’t take him to Koi Tower was to go with Jin Guangyao.

Did that inherently make it the best option?

It wouldn’t interfere with his mission to take a child along. Sisi was there, and while he’d had to deal with some unpleasant men, they were the cowardly sort who bullied prostitutes because they thought they could get away with it. Jin Guangyao didn’t have to be a good cultivator to scare them away.

“Oh, I’ve seen that expression before,” Sisi crossed her arms.

“What?” He looked up.

“Same look your mother had on her face when she decided to keep you.”

Was he really becoming so easy to read?

“You don’t object?” He asked.

“As long as we don’t do this with every child we encounter...” She trailed off, “You’ve never been impulsive, A-Yao. There’s a reason you reacted like that.” She smiled, “I think you’ll be good for each other.”

Jin Guangyao didn’t sleep until Mo Xuanyu’s fever broke.

He couldn’t believe he was doing this. What if he messed up? What if Mo Xuanyu ended up just as messed up as himself?

He wasn't sure what time of day it was when dark eyes fluttered open. He helped the child drink some water. Mo Xuanyu at least seemed to recognize him, which was good. He wasn't sure how much of his quick introduction he'd remember through the haze of illness.

"Yao-ge," The child whined, "I'm hungry."

Jin Guangyao could fix that.

Sisi was right. He'd never been impulsive. When he'd met Madam Mo, he'd been immediately reminded of Madam Jin. He saw Mo Ziyuan being spoiled and thought of Zixuan. He heard about how the bastard's mother had died from illness and only thought of his own mother. Then the servants were complaining about how troublesome Mo Xuanyu was.

They tried to pretend like it was the child's fault he was so difficult to find. As if hiding were a game and not a means of survival.

By the time he actually saw Mo Xuanyu for himself, he'd already decided to do this.

Now, he just had to try his best.

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Xingchen once told him he was afraid he was cursed.

Song Lan had dismissed it at the time. Xingchen was too good of a person to be cursed. If there was any sort of cosmic justice in the world, it would see that only good things happen to him.

Then they met Xue Yang.

When Yanling Daoren descended from Baoshan Sanren's mountain, he was praised as a skilled cultivator. He went around helping people. He became famous for his skill. Whatever happened to him that changed him into a villain worthy of the entire cultivation world's condemnation was lost to history.

Cangse Sanren was the next to descend the mountain. She also traveled, earning the admiration of many. Tales were still told of her many suitors, but she chose to marry a servant. Together, the two of them continued to travel, going around and helping people. Whatever happened to them that left their son orphaned and alone was also a mystery.

Song Lan glanced at his new traveling partner. Wei Wuxian, son of Cangse Sanren.

Song Lan didn't let rumors affect his judgment, but he wasn't deaf.

Wei Wuxian was headed towards his own tragic end, but the determination of his friend to not let it be a mystery saved him. At least from the same fate as Yanling Daoren. There was still the chance he could die while traveling like his mother.

It was hard to say if Song Lan found Wei Wuxian or if Wei Wuxian found him.

He'd been searching for Xingchen since he woke up and found them separated. He forced himself to focus on finding Xingchen rather than hunting down Xue Yang. Xingchen wouldn't want him to go down the path of revenge.

Still, he knew Yin Iron could be used to track itself. He knew Xue Yang disappeared with one piece of it. He knew that Wei Wuxian had the rest of it.

It would be so easy to ask Wei Wuxian to track down Xue Yang...

"Have you seen a blind cultivator dressed in all white?" Song Lan asked.

He could feel Wei Wuxian's gaze burning the side of his head, but he kept his focus on the vendor he'd asked.

"No," The man answered.

Song Lan nodded, then turned to go down the street.

Wei Wuxian fell into step next to him, "Xiao Xingchen is blind?"

"Yes," He answered tightly.

"I thought your eyes were the ones damaged by Xue Yang," His companion said.

Wei Wuxian could put the pieces together. After all, he'd done the same thing with a different part of himself, but if he wanted him to admit his shame aloud...

"He gave me his eyes," Song Lan grimaced.

"Is that why you aren't traveling together?" He wasn't looking at him anymore. Instead, he was twirling his flute around, "You never did say why you separated."

"I..." Song Lan's hands clenched into fists, "I was upset that my Sect was massacred, and I took it out on Xingchen. I blamed him."

"Ah," Wei Wuxian didn't pause in his movements, "Well, to be fair, Xue Yang wouldn't have attacked your Sect if it weren't for Xiao Xingchen."

"That isn't fair at all," He snapped, "It wasn't Xingchen's fault, and I never should have implied otherwise."

His companion didn't respond to his anger. He just tilted his head, "Do you think Wen Ruohan taught them both that? Or do you think Wen Chao picked it up from Xue Yang? Wen Chao didn't have the intelligence to plan such cruelty...then again, unintended cruelty can hurt just as much."

He threw his flute up in the air and caught it, "Even if you didn't blame him, he would have blamed himself. Trust me."

Song Lan did.

“Do you blame yourself for-” He cut himself off, but not fast enough.

Talking with Wei Wuxian was as easy as talking to Xingchen. They weren’t the same person, but they were similar enough. Maybe Wei Wuxian took after his mother. He had a feeling that Baoshan Sanren instilled the same values into her disciples.

“Yes and no,” Wei Wuxian answered, “I know it was my actions that gave Wen Chao an excuse, but I don’t regret those actions. That’s all irrelevant really.”

“Is it?” Song Lan muttered.

“He didn’t give up his eyes because he felt guilty,” Xingchen’s martial nephew said, his tone serious, “If there’d been no attack, if Jiang Cheng lost his golden core on a night hunt, or any reason really, my actions would have been the same. Because I love him. I would die for him. Any pain, any sacrifice, if I knew it would make his life better, would be worth it.”

“I never asked for such sacrifice,” Song Lan assumed Sect Leader Jiang hadn’t either.

“You don’t need to ask,” Wei Wuxian replied, “Though I have to ask if you want to see Xiao Xingchen again?”

“What?” He stopped in his tracks, “I have to make things right.”

“To ease your conscience?” His companion wondered.

“Because I have honor,” Song Lan answered.

Slowly, Wei Wuxian turned to face him, “What does making things right look like here? Will you give him back his eyes? Are you going to offer to be his eyes? Is this going to hang over the two of you for the rest of your lives?”

He didn’t have a response for that. He’d been so focused on finding Xingchen and apologizing that the afterwards didn’t occur to him. He wanted them to go back to traveling together, to eradicating the evils of the world. They could begin the search for disciples, achieve their dream of creating a Sect together. Like they’d always planned to.

Song Lan swallowed dryly, understanding the meaning behind Wei Wuxian’s questions.

Could they go back to who they were? Before he’d lost his Sect and Xingchen his eyes?

Did Xingchen have the same fears as him? Would he worry that Song Lan was staying with him out of guilt? Would he think his previous anger just buried instead of dissipated? Would a part of him always believe Song Lan resented him?

“I don’t think I will ever call Lotus Pier home again,” Wei Wuxian turned away, continuing down the road back to the inn, “And while Jiang Cheng and I have mended our relationship, it’s not the same as it was. Are you prepared to accept what may happen when we find Xiao Xingchen?”

Song Lan looked down, “I am.”



Wei Wuxian stopped, looking back at him with a wry smile, “Ah, don’t look so serious, Song-xiong. I’m not Xiao Xingchen, and you’re not Jiang Cheng. I get why you didn’t tell me, but...”

Song Lan closed the distance between them, “But what?”

“I didn’t realize there was a possibility that Xiao Xingchen wouldn’t want you to find him.”

Cursed.

Xingchen feared he was cursed. Watching the tragedy and destruction Xue Yang brought...

It wasn’t just a possibility. It was probable that Xingchen was avoiding him.

“Searching for him like this won’t work,” Song Lan realized.

It was a good thing Wei Wuxian was with him. Asking directly was the only approach Song Lan could use when it came to talking to people. The other man was much better at starting a conversation and steering it towards recent events. It took much longer to get the information they wanted, but it meant they wouldn’t leave a trail for Xingchen to avoid.

If it also meant an increase in requests from small villages....they were both very capable cultivators.

Song Lan was hopeful they would find Xingchen soon.

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Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure how to tell Song Lan they were being hunted.

Well, the words themselves were simple. Hey, Song-xiong, we’re being followed by someone I’m pretty sure wants to kill us.

But it wasn’t that easy. Now that he knew the full extent of what happened to Song Lan and Xiao Xingchen, he really didn’t want to mention that he could sense Xue Yang getting closer to them. The Amulet was acting up with the last piece of Yin Iron drawing closer. It was getting harder and harder to ignore.

Wei Wuxian sent a letter to Nie Huaisang about it.

Technically, it was the Nie Sect’s responsibility. As long as Xue Yang wasn’t actively causing problems, Wei Wuxian was inclined to focus on finding Xiao Xingchen.

Jiang Cheng would be proud of him for that thought.

He was sure Song Lan would make the same decision as him, but he still hesitated to bring it up.

After all, who was he to deny Song Lan his revenge if he asked for it? He’d gotten his own on Wen Chao and Wen Zhuliu. Hell, he’d even gotten to Wang Lingjiao. He was no longer in

such a dark mindset, but it was always there. The resentment he used always held whispers. The Amulet had its own desire.

But staying silent didn't sit right with him either.

"Song-xiong," He broke the silence between them, "I can sense Xue Yang nearby."

Song Lan looked up at him from where he walked next to the donkey. His expression was hard to read, "Intentionally?"

"He can probably sense me in return," Wei Wuxian wondered if their ranges differed because of the amount. Would the larger amount be more sensitive or give off more energy to be sensed? It was something to consider later, "So it must be intentional."

"Do you think he knows we're traveling together?" Song Lan asked.

"He's not that close," He leaned back in his saddle, bringing up one leg, "But I don't think he'd come this close to me if he was working alone."

His companion grimaced, "Should we be wary of a trap?"

"I think we can handle whatever they've planned for us," Wei Wuxian grinned.

They were too easy to trap. All it took was one created emergency, and they would offer to help. Such was the way of the world. Good people got taken advantage of.

Add that to the increasing chance Xiao Xingchen was nearby?

Whoever was planning to trap him planned it well.

Wei Wuxian held back when they finally found Xiao Xingchen. It wasn't that he doubted the two of them. He was sure that they would have found the wayward cultivator eventually. But there was something about the case that drew them to the village. Missing children, abducted in the middle of the night, all within the last few days.

He wouldn't begrudge Song Lan his happy reunion though.

This was why he couldn't stay in Lotus Pier. This was why he couldn't stay in Cloud Recesses either.

This should have been a happy moment, and all he could think about was how it couldn't last.

Because of him.

"Wei Wuxian," Xiao Xingchen approached him with a small smile, "I had thought us meeting again would be impossible."

"Attempt the impossible," Wei Wuxian quipped.

“Indeed,” His martial uncle tilted his head, “Zichen tells me you are seeking Baoshan Sanren?”

“I figured if I didn’t go now, I’d never go,” He replied, “Can you help me?”

Xiao Xingchen paused, “Why do you seek the Immortal?”

“I want to know more about my mother, where she came from,” Wei Wuxian swallowed, “Where I come from. It’s like...there’s this part of me that’s missing. I could keep going, try to fill it with other things, but...”

“It will always be missing,” His martial uncle finished.

Wei Wuxian was tempted to ask why Xiao Xingchen descended into the mortal world. Was it pure selflessness? Was he just determined to try his best to make the world a better place? Or was he also seeking his own understanding of the world he’d been born into? Did he wonder about his parents? Or was he at peace with the lack of knowledge?

“Will you help me?” He asked.

Xiao Xingchen’s smile faded, “I don’t know...”

It wasn’t that he didn’t know how to find Baoshan Sanren. He obviously had some way of knowing, otherwise he couldn’t have gone to her to help Song Lan. Similarly with tradition. He’d already broken tradition by going back to Baoshan Sanren. It couldn’t be any worse to give him some hints.

Wei Wuxian took a deep breath, “Just think about it. We have children to find.”

Xiao Xingchen nodded, “Zichen warned this may be a trap.”

“Oh, it’s definitely a trap,” The demonic cultivator laughed, “But what else can we do?”

“The nearest cultivation Sect is the MolingSu,” Song Lan suggested.

“Who are either incompetent or in on it,” Wei Wuxian dismissed.

He didn’t think Su She had a reason to want to kill him, but who said it had to be personal? It could just be for the power he carried with him.

“If we don’t take the bait, maybe they’ll bring the children back,” Xiao Xingchen grimaced.

None of them believed for a moment they could even pretend to leave children in danger.

“Then this will turn into a hostage situation,” Wei Wuxian sighed.

“The children for the Amulet,” Song Lan murmured.

“Could we destroy the Amulet?” His martial uncle inquired, “If there is nothing to be gained-”

“Do you think Xue Yang can show mercy?” Song Lan interrupted.

Part of Wei Wuxian wanted to suggest the two of them leave. It would be easier to do whatever needed to be done if it were just himself.

Then he thought about how everyone would be so disappointed if he sent away help.

“Let’s find where they’re keeping the children first,” Wei Wuxian said instead, “Once we have a better idea what we’re up against, we can make better decisions.”

There! He wasn’t immediately offering to sacrifice himself!

Thoughts didn’t have to translate into actions. He still had an impending sense of doom, and he still blamed himself for what may be coming, but that didn’t mean he had to face it alone.

Besides, if anyone deserved to kick Xue Yang’s ass, it was the two men with him.

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Why was it so hard to do the right thing?

Xiao Xingchen didn’t have to see to know everything was going wrong.

Zichen tried to convince him he wasn’t cursed, but this was just further evidence of the contrary.

“Daozhang!” One of the children asked, “Are the other Daozhangs going to be alright?”

Xiao Xingchen didn’t know. There were more participants from the Su Sect than they’d anticipated. There were also Xue Yang and his experiments to consider as well. Wei Wuxian claimed to be more than enough to match Xue Yang, and Zichen implored him to get the children somewhere safe while he handled the other cultivators.

It was a confusing mesh of attacks. Wei Wuxian and the Su Sect members both used musical cultivation, while Zichen and Xue Yang relied on their swords.

“They are strong,” Xiao Xingchen tried for a reassuring tone, but he wasn’t sure he completely masked his worry.

It took too long to retrace the path to Wei Wuxian’s donkey. None of the children were confident in their ability to find their way home on their own. He was similarly reluctant to send them down a road where they might encounter other dangers. At least there were supplies on the donkey. Hopefully they would stay close to it.

Hopefully they would gather the courage to follow the road if no one returned for them.

Xiao Xingchen held his sword tighter as he went back to the fight. He was well aware of his disadvantage here. It was easy to continue night-hunting. His sword was drawn to resentment. The point would find its way to its target with little direction from him.

However, he didn't know how to fight when both sides were using resentment. He didn't want to accidentally injure Wei Wuxian.

His other senses also weren't of use to him. There was too much noise from the music to pinpoint where people were. The clashing of blades gave him more hints, but he could hardly block attacks when the sound itself reaching him was the attack.

"Give it back!" Xue Yang screamed.

An even greater wave of resentment washed over the battlefield.

"The pieces of the Yin Iron want to find each other," Wei Wuxian's voice was oddly strained.

Was it too much?

Xiao Xingchen struggled to even move towards him. Perhaps it was good that he could not see, for he could not imagine what this might look like.

If it were any other person, Xiao Xingchen would have run. This much energy couldn't possibly be controlled for long, and its malicious intent was obvious.

But this was Wei Wuxian. The son of Cangse Sanren, the most beloved of all of Baoshan Sanren's students. He knew his teacher well. He knew how much it pained her to see his Shijie leave. To make that kind of impression on an immortal...she must have been special. Her son was just as special.

"Can you control it?" Xiao Xingchen asked.

Wei Wuxian's breathing was too fast. Was he injured? There was a scent of blood in the air but there was no telling who it belonged to. He grunted, "For now."

"It must be destroyed," He decided, "Soon."

"Can't," Wei Wuxian panted, "Not here."

An item this powerful would defend itself. He bit back a question of if Wei Wuxian would be destroyed as well.

There was too much power here now that all the pieces of the Yin Iron were together.

They didn't have another choice.

"Then where?" Xiao Xingchen had thought it was too risky to fly on his sword while he couldn't see. For this, he was willing to take the risk.

Then something was pressed into his hands, "A remote place with little resentment. Ideally."

It felt like a talisman paper. Ah, a transportation talisman? Wei Wuxian didn't have the spiritual power to send himself somewhere. Xiao Xingchen gathered his own spiritual energy.

He had been to many places in his travels, but only one fitting his specifications came to mind.

He spared half a thought for an apology to Zichen.

They'd only just been reunited.

Xiao Xingchen placed his free hand on Wei Wuxian's shoulder.

He activated the talisman.

The drain to his energy was greater than anticipated. He had never been the type to go all out against an opponent. He'd always held something back, just in case. It cost almost all his energy to get them to their destination safely.

He sank to his knees, exhausted.

"Get out of here," Wei Wuxian commanded.

"Do it," Xiao Xingchen ordered right back.

He didn't think he could move. Not even the possibility of death would give his limbs strength to support him.

This world wasn't made for people like them. They were too generous, and so the world took and took until there was nothing left to take.

"Zichen, I'm sorry," He whispered out loud.

He tried to believe that he wasn't cursed. He tried to believe that they could achieve their dreams. That the Sect they would build together wouldn't be another thing the world took away from them. The bandages covering his eyes began to stick, turning damp with the tears he was shedding.

He would never regret meeting Zichen. He could never regret meeting Zichen.

But maybe he should never have left Baoshan Sanren.

There was one moment of calm as Wei Wuxian brought the energy towards himself.

If this was the end, so be it.

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"He's not dead," Jiang Wanyin whispered.

"Jiang-xiong..." Nie Huaisang trailed off, "I investigated the matter personally-"

"Shut up!" Jiang Wanyin shouted.

Lan Wangji sat silently. He didn't believe it either.

His hands shook, so he hid them under his sleeves. He should have killed Su She when he had the chance. He shouldn't have settled for humiliation. He shouldn't have let Xichen convince him that without Jin Guangyao's support, Su She was harmless.

"There's no body," Jiang Yanli said shakily, "Until there's a body..."

"A-Li," Jin Zixuan hesitated, "Given Xiao Xingchen's account...there might not be a body."

Su She was dead.

Xue Yang was dead.

Song Zichen had seen to that.

There was no vengeance to be had. No justice either.

"But Xiao Xingchen survived," Jiang Yanli protested, "So..."

Her husband shook his head.

"What about his soul then?" Jiang Wanyin demanded, "That wasn't...that wasn't a peaceful death. So why hasn't he responded?"

"There's a chance his soul shattered," Xichen answered.

Just like the Amulet.

It was all gone. No traces left. Nor was there any trace of the man who forged it.

"Wei Ying is not dead," Lan Wangji stated.

There was no body. There was no soul. Yes, those could both be explained away as the cost of destroying the Amulet, but there was also another explanation.

Wei Ying was alive.

"Then where is he?" Nie Huaisang asked.

Lan Wangji couldn't answer that. He also couldn't listen as Nie Huaisang continued to give details into his investigation.

He wasn't sure how long he stood outside, but it was Jin Zixuan who approached him first.

"I know this has been a rough time for you," The Jin Sect Leader started, "But I think A-Li and I have decided on a courtesy name for A-Yuan. I'm sure it's the last thing on your mind, but...well, it'll make sense once you read it." Then he deliberately set a piece of paper on the rail next to him.

Wei Ying wasn't gone.

His current disappearance, however, reminded them all there were still threats to him, and the Wen Remnants.

A-Yuan needed the new name.

Lan Wangji took a deep breath, and picked up the paper.

Sizhui.

Wei Ying wasn't dead, but he was still gone.

This name suited A-Yuan. It was perfect.

## Chapter End Notes

Once again reminding people there is a chapter left. WWX is not dead.

Did I make the fight scene from the XXC's POV so I wouldn't have to write a fight scene? Yes. Very much so.

Did I have WWX appear to die so I wouldn't have to come up with another name for LSZ? Also yes.

Just kidding. I personally struggle with ending stories. Every ending seems abrupt to me, because stories don't really end. Authors just stop telling them.

I really want this to stay under 300,000 words, so I can't just keep adding every idea that comes to mind. As tempting as it is to have a story never end. It's also a weird transition from having all these events take place within the span of a week to having an ongoing event take place over months. Sorry if it seems abrupt.

Thank you for all your support! We just passed 7,400 kudos! I never imagined this would be so well-received!



# We Have Time

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You are safe here.”

There was something about the way Baoshan Sanren spoke. It was as though every word carried the weight of her lifespan. There was a certainty in her eyes he had never seen before. A confidence that must have taken a hundred years to develop. It was as comforting as it was off-putting.

Maybe what was surreal was that Wei Wuxian believed her.

Safe wasn't a word he associated with many things. The streets hadn't been safe as a child. He constantly had to be alert for cruel humans or vicious dogs. Lotus Pier, while better than the streets, also wasn't safe. Not as long as Madam Yu was there, quick with her hurting words and whip.

Being a cultivator brought too much danger to ever truly be safe. That was true in both Lotus Pier and the Cloud Recesses.

Then came the war.

And after the war.

The closest he got to safe was Lan Zhan. He couldn't have left A-Yuan with anyone else.

“Thank you,” Wei Wuxian whispered.

Would it be silly to ask an immortal how long he'd been unconscious? Did she even note the passing of days anymore? He'd been in and out of it for some time. He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious before that or how he got here. He pushed himself into a seated position so he could at least show some respect.

He wasn't even sure she was Baoshan Sanren, but there was no one else she could be. Every instinct told him she was his grandmaster.

“Xingchen brought you close,” Baoshan Sanren decided to explain as she knelt to help him drink some water, “I felt what you were destroying...”

He swallowed. It barely made a difference in the dryness in his throat, “My apologies for bringing such evil near your sanctuary.”

“My thanks for destroying such evil,” She replied, “I won't ask how you acquired it.”

Wei Wuxian managed a smile, “Are you sure? It's quite a story.”

“I am a patient woman,” Baoshan Sanren returned the smile, then slowly reached out to touch his hair, “When I heard my student had a son, I hoped I would meet you, Wei Ying.”

So she knew who he was. More questions got stuck in his throat. If she knew about him, did she ever try to look for him? She was rumored to go around and bring orphaned children to her mountain.

There were so many orphans. Even Uncle Jiang, with all the resources of a Major Sect at his disposal, took years to find him.

Or did she hear of him later? It wasn't often her students descended, and they weren't meant to return. What news did they receive of the outside world?

There were too many questions. He felt dizzy with them.

Or he was just dizzy from surviving the Amulet trying to destroy him before he could destroy it.

“Rest, child,” Baoshan Sanren advised, “We can speak more the next time you wake up.”

Wei Wuxian found it easy to sleep.

There was no resentment here. No whispers from the vengeful dead. The Amulet was well and truly gone. There was no need to protect his mind from it. The immortal's presence offered such warmth, such safety, that he knew his sleep would be undisturbed by nightmares.

He could rest here.

The guilt hit him when he woke the next morning.

“What happened to Xiao Xingchen?” He asked as Baoshan Sanren brought him breakfast.

He remembered telling the man to run. He remembered the blind man refusing. He'd still tried to push him away, but was it far enough?

“He is well. Others found him,” The immortal assured him, “While this place is remote, the destruction of the Yin Iron caused enough of a disturbance to merit investigation.”

Wei Wuxian frowned, “My apologies again.”

“They don't know we're here,” Baoshan Sanren patted his arm.

“Then do they know I survived?” He wondered.

She paused as she placed a bowl in front of him, “Would it be so bad to let them believe otherwise?”

Wei Wuxian just stared at her.

Xiao Xingchen wouldn't give away the location of his teacher. If he couldn't say that Baoshan Sanren saved him, then the assumption would be that Wei Wuxian wasn't saved. When he failed to reappear, even those who would wait for a body before coming to any further conclusions would start to doubt him being alive.

The more time that passed, the more who would think him dead.

Eventually, everyone would think he was dead.

Everyone.

Shijie. Lan Zhan. Jiang Cheng. A-Yuan.

"I have also heard about the Yiling Patriarch," Baoshan Sanren handed him a cup of tea, "You are an extraordinarily intelligent man. You've done what no one else has accomplished before." She took a drink from hers, "But once something is invented, it becomes easy for others to use."

Wei Wuxian gripped his cup tightly. It wasn't something he liked to think about. There would be other demonic cultivators who followed his example. Especially now that they knew he did it all without a golden core. Some would genuinely be better at it than traditional cultivation. Others would decide it was an easier path to power.

Power that could be abused.

They would quickly learn that demonic cultivation wasn't as easy as he made it look, yet even their failures would produce something new.

"They fear you, because they do not understand you," She continued, "They condemn you, because it is easier to destroy that which is different than to assimilate it."

"You condemned Lan Yi," Wei Wuxian commented.

He didn't want to upset or insult the immortal, but he had to mention Lan Yi. His thoughts went back to her often during his exile to the Burial Mounds. How she reached too far, and then spent the rest of her energy containing her failure so it would not harm others.

If Baoshan Sanren had not gone into seclusion, could she have saved her?

Or did she go into seclusion to avoid all thought of Lan Yi? Was her betrayal that painful?

"Lan Yi..." The immortal grimaced, "Her elders always made her feel as though she needed to prove herself worthy of her position. It was never necessary." She set down her cup of tea with more force than he expected, "When she made the decision to revitalize her Sect, I supported her. I was relieved she finally understood the problem wasn't her, but everyone else."

"That's why I mentioned the Yin Iron at all," She continued, "I believed her to be beyond the foolishness of living for others' expectations. I thought reminding her how many men in her

position had failed, with their failure lingering for centuries, would be good for her. But she once again decided she needed to do more, to be more, when it was all...

"Unnecessary," Wei Wuxian finished, "Is that why you can forgive me?"

Baoshan Sanren didn't answer. Instead, she said, "Necessity fuels creation. When something must be accomplished, someone finds a way."

Whereas Lan Yi didn't actually have to use the Yin Iron's power.

The Lan Sect was fine without it.

If she had succeeded back then, if she had been able to use the power of the Yin Iron to change things, would her fate not have been the same?

"You were in an impossible situation," Baoshan Sanren placed her hand over his, "So you did the impossible. You will face no condemnation here."

"But I will out there," Wei Wuxian acknowledged.

As much as he set out to find Baoshan Sanren, to find himself, he also knew it was for everyone's best that he disappear from Sect life. There could be no whispers of the Jiang Sect becoming home to more demonic cultivators if he wasn't there to hypothetically train them. An attack to get the Amulet was also inevitable...

People were afraid of him. They would continue to be afraid of him, even if he was declared dead.

Instead of being a threat, he would become a legend. A ghost story. A parable.

But his reputation had already begun to change. Nie Huaisang appointed himself to that task. With the Compass of Evil going into production, and a guide to demonic entities in progress, as long as he wasn't alive to get in his own way, eventually they would see him as useful.

They'd still curse his name every time a demonic cultivator caused trouble.

They'd also wonder what he could have done, every time one of his inventions saved a life, if the world had just been a little kinder, a little more willing to broaden the path instead of forcing him on a diverging one.

"Take this opportunity to rest," The immortal advised, "They can't kill what they believe to be dead. When you are stronger, and the world is more lenient, then you can return."

"How long will that take?" Wei Wuxian wondered.

"I don't know," Baoshan Sanren admitted, "Change is slow, but the world can change. Trust me."

Wei Wuxian nodded. Part of him wanted to leave immediately, to let all of his loved ones know he was alive.

A larger part of him understood why he couldn't do that. If he rushed back out there, he was a dead man walking. Without the Amulet he was more vulnerable than ever to those who would never accept anything untraditional.

It took time for the world to accept change.

They would never fully accept him, not in his lifetime, but if it meant he could live a more peaceful life outside of Baoshan Sanren's protection, then it was worth waiting for.

"You may leave whenever you wish," She assured him.

"I'm sure," He swallowed again, trying to swallow his doubt with it, "There is much you can teach me."

"There is much I am eager to share," The immortal smiled.

Wei Wuxian had all the right people in his life.

Now, he just needed to wait for the right time.

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"I could bring him back," Nie Huaisang whispered.

Jiang Cheng narrowed his eyes. It was his wedding day, and everyone was doing their best not to mention who was missing from the festivities. He had planned to wait for the idiot to finish with his travels. Hell, he knew the idiot's return would be followed by a quick marriage to Hanguang-Jun, regardless of what other events were happening, so he didn't plan anything.

Some part of him still didn't want to believe he was gone.

And yet...his brother would have hated it if he didn't move forward. So they did the mourning period, and then started on the plans for his wedding to Wen Qing.

If Hanguang-Jun was still dressed in all white, well, he was from the Lan Sect. Their regular robes looked like mourning robes anyways.

If it was hard to tell if A-Jie was crying from joy or grief, then it was because weddings made everyone emotional. She'd cried the same way on her own wedding day. It had nothing to do with the same man who missed her wedding.

Honestly, Jiang Cheng couldn't think of a better way to honor Wei Wuxian's memory than by cementing Wen Qing and the rest of the Wen Remnant's safety. It wasn't like he'd ever dreamed of a perfect wedding for himself anyways.

He was missing a lot of people he'd have included in that dream, if it existed.

"What?" He snapped, too curious to just dismiss Nie Huaisang.

“I could bring Wei-xiong back,” The smaller man repeated.

“You’re drunk,” Jiang Cheng turned away.

“Oh, I wish I was,” Nie Huaisang muttered, “I just thought...someone else should know.”

There was silence between the two of them.

He was not tempted. Messing around with the dead never led to anything good.

“How?” He demanded.

Nie Huaisang slumped, “Self-sacrifice. Summoner gives over their body to a summoned soul. As long as the summoned soul completes the dying wish of the summoner, the body is theirs forever.”

Jiang Cheng slammed down some wine. He promised he wouldn’t get too drunk, but those weren’t words he wanted to hear sober, “Where the hell did you come across that?”

“Wei-xiong’s notes,” His friend admitted, “It’s Wei-xiong’s method, and ever since I read that...we know what path he was on. Him living was-”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” The Jiang Sect Leader cut him off.

“Fine, but he came up with the ritual. It had to be for a reason, right?” Nie Huaisang asked, “Attempt the impossible and all that. Maybe he wants to be brought back?”

Jiang Cheng couldn’t help it. He snorted, “Wei Wuxian would never want to live off another’s sacrifice.”

As much as he wanted his brother back, he’d rather him be dead than guilt ridden every time he looked in the mirror.

“But what if the other person was going to die anyway?” Nie Huaisang pressed, “What if they were miserable-”

“Nie-xiong,” Jiang Cheng pressed his hand over his mouth, silencing him, “Nie-xiong. Do you understand what you’re saying?”

His friend was too smart. Still, he didn’t nod.

“If you find someone that miserable, someone that close to the edge, and you push them off,” Jiang Cheng inhaled shakily, “If you manipulate them to bring Wei Wuxian back, you might as well have stabbed them yourself. Do you understand?”

That got him a nod, so he removed his hand.

“I know,” Nie Huaisang whispered, “But I’m finding it hard to care.”

Wei Wuxian was the one who cared the most amongst them.

“I won’t tell your brother, Nie-xiong,” Jiang Cheng promised, “But we can’t do this. It’s my Sect’s words, I get to decide what they mean.”

Attempt the impossible. Wei Wuxian interpreted that to mean that no rule was more important than someone’s life.

Jiang Cheng could only try to be as dedicated to what was right.

He went outside. He knew he shouldn’t leave Wen Qing’s side for too long on their wedding day, but he needed a moment. This wasn’t something he should keep to himself. A-Jie, Wen Qing, Hanguang-Jun...they at least deserved to be part of the decision. But the more who knew the dead could be brought back, the more that could attempt it.

The easier it would be.

“Damn it all!” He shattered his jar of wine against the boards of the floor.

“Are you alright?” Wen Ning came out of wherever he’d been hiding.

“If you had a choice, would you want to be what you are now?” Jiang Cheng asked before he could stop himself.

Wen Ning was alive. That was all that mattered to Wen Qing. But Jiang Cheng could see his struggles. It was impossible for his body to produce tears. His sense of smell and taste were off. His sense of touch was also off. It was his body, but it was different.

Would that be similar to being in a body that wasn’t his original? Putting Wei Wuxian’s soul in a completely different body...would he still be able to tolerate his insane amount of spice? Would his laugh sound the same with a different voice?

Wen Ning was alive. His sister brought him back and she never regretted it for a moment.

But no one had to die to bring Wen Ning back.

“If I wasn’t what I am now, I’d be dead,” Wen Ning said, “No one should choose death.”

To bring back Wei Wuxian, someone would have to choose death.

Jiang Cheng once thought he had given his life for his brother.

Never again. They’d promised they wouldn’t sacrifice more for each other.

“Thank you,” Jiang Cheng forced himself to relax, to let this go.

Wen Ning nodded.

It was his wedding day. He was determined to be a better person, for his wife, for his family, for his Sect. Maybe, if he was a better person, he would be a happier person. Maybe he could stop being so angry all the time.

Attempt the impossible. Do the right thing, regardless of the circumstances.

Be unselfish in a selfish world.

Wen Qing looked beautiful in red. She looked beautiful regardless of what she was wearing, but red suited her best.

“What did Nie Huaisang have to say?” She inquired.

“I’ll tell you later,” He promised. He laced their fingers together and smiled.

Attempt the impossible.

Be happy in an unhappy world.

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Wei Wuxian settled down to meditate.

It was weird, meditating for meditation’s sake. He wasn’t trying to concentrate spiritual energy into making his golden core stronger. Nor was he trying to keep a handle on the resentful energy within him. He just focused on his breathing, and the feel of the world around him.

Time passed, and it would continue passing.

As much as he missed the outside world, this place was peaceful.

Here, he wasn’t Wei Wuxian, the son of a servant, the rumored bastard of a Sect Leader. Here, he wasn’t the prodigy that outshined the real heir to the Jiang Sect. He wasn’t the person who won a war. He wasn’t the Yiling Patriarch, or the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation.

Here, he was just Wei Wuxian, son of Cangse Sanren.

It was a simple existence.

“You gave your golden core away for your brother?” Baoshan Sanren asked.

Wei Wuxian cracked open an eye. Usually, when they meditated, neither of them spoke.

“I did,” He answered.

“A noble sacrifice,” She complimented.

“That seems to be the consensus,” Wei Wuxian muttered, closing his eye again.

“I believe I could give you another,” Baoshan Sanren said.

“Not from nothing.”



“Nothing comes from nothing,” The immortal agreed, “But you do realize you are family here, don’t you?”

Wei Wuxian tensed, “Not that kind of family.”

“I don’t know,” She replied, “You could be, if you stay long enough. You are a very easy person to love.”

He tried to go back to a peaceful meditation.

“We have time,” She advised, “Give it some thought.”

How could he do anything else?

Baoshan Sanren was smart. She'd obtained immortality. She had never thought of a golden core transfer until he told her of his own. With her power, and experience, she could likely achieve the same result as Wen Qing.

There was always the chance none of her current students would be willing to give him one...

But what if one would?

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Jin Zixuan pinched the bridge of his nose, “I’m sorry, you taught A-Yu what?”

“I may have taught him some demonic cultivation,” Guangyao repeated slowly.

“Why would you...?” The Jin Sect Leader sighed.

“He struggles with traditional cultivation,” His brother explained, “Since he’s been sneaking out to attempt night hunts anyway, I figured another form of protection wouldn’t be such a bad thing.” And there was his usual smirk, “He’s actually quite skilled.”

Of course he was.

“More skilled than he is with makeup?” Jin Zixuan asked.

“Better,” Guangyao said.

The Jin Sect Leader leaned further on his hand, “What did he do with it?”

If anyone had asked him how a child raised by his brother would have turned out, Jin Zixuan would have guessed perfect. He didn’t think Guangyao was the type of man to let his child be anything less. He believed that so strongly he almost demanded Mo Xuanyu be brought to Koi Tower.

He was grateful he hadn’t.

They had Jin Xuanyu now. He was barely a teenager and already a troublemaker. He learned to put on makeup from the ladies in the best brothels and chose to wear it terribly. He was

always up to something, whether it was sneaking away on ‘nighthunts’ or pranking whoever annoyed him. He was loud. He was eccentric. He was shameless.

Guangyao and A-Li did nothing to reign him in. Neither did the Jin Sect Leader.

No one said it, but Jin Zixuan sometimes felt like they were raising the second coming of Wei Wuxian.

Maybe someone would say it now, since Jin Xuanyu publicly used demonic cultivation.

As Guangyao explained what happened, he analyzed the potential fallout. It was debatable whether his actions had been necessary. By most accounts, the night hunt hadn’t been going terribly.

Jin Xuanyu just wanted to impress a boy from the Nie Sect. Demonic cultivation was the way he went about doing so.

There had been other demonic cultivators since Wei Wuxian died. The major Sects chose to judge them by their actions, not their methods. For the most part, the minor Sects fell in line. But there hadn’t been anyone genuinely skilled with it, nor anyone affiliated with a major Sect.

Whatever decision he came to today would establish a precedent.

Demonic cultivation was still demonic cultivation. It had its dangers. Quite honestly, they didn’t know enough about it to safely incorporate it. It was mostly accepted as a last resort. He wasn’t sure it could be accepted as the go to method.

“Did he at least impress the boy?” Jin Zixuan asked.

Whatever he decided, he would have the other major Sects support. There was little they disagreed upon nowadays.

To everyone else, it would look like he was favoring his younger brother. From what he learned about politics, that approach would actually cause him less trouble. They would all assume he was letting demonic cultivation be because the demonic cultivator was Jin Xuanyu.

The actual battle would come when he let another demonic cultivator stay in the Jin Sect.

Hopefully, that battle would be fought by someone else in another Sect.

Guangyao laughed, “No. It appears we have another you in the making on that front.”

Of course they did.

“Why doesn’t Sizhui cause Hanguang-Jun this much trouble?” Jin Zixuan complained.

“Consider it practice for when Rulan gets older,” His brother advised.

A-Ling was never going to grow up. Right now, he was as sweet and kind as his mother and they only occasionally saw glimpses of Jin Zixuan's stubbornness and arrogance.

All the children were growing up quicker than he'd like. At least he could say they were growing up in a world completely different from Jin Zixuan's childhood. He couldn't imagine having monthly visits to other Sects, much less actually enjoying the company of the cousins he visited. He almost pitied Lan Qiren and the challenge he would face when they were lecture age.

Especially if demonic cultivators kept growing in numbers.

As long as it didn't lead to more war in the cultivation world, Jin Zixuan was content to leave them be.

He sat up, "I hope you know that A-Yu won't be punished. For any of this."

"I know he won't," His brother replied.

"Good," The Jin Sect Leader smiled, "He's a good boy, all things considered."

"Better people are in power," Guangyao rose from his seat.

Jin Zixuan laughed.

His brother's visits were becoming more frequent, but they were always short. As much as Jin Xuanyu hung around Koi Tower, neither of his brothers called it home the way he did. Guangyao had found himself outside Koi Tower. They both agreed it was best if it stayed that way.

"Yao-ge! Xuan-ge!" Jin Xuanyu immediately rose, "Are we banished? Do we have to go live with Er-ge now?"

He didn't sound like that would be a punishment at all.

"If the Jin Sect can't accept demonic cultivation, what makes you think the Lan Sect would be any better?" Guangyao wondered.

"Er-ge's the nicest person in the world," Jin Xuanyu proclaimed, "And wasn't Hanguang-Jun, like, engaged to Wei Wuxian?"

"You would be expelled from the Cloud Recesses in a week," Jin Zixuan cut off that line of discussion.

His eyes were on his wife, who had been entertaining his younger brother while they'd talked. After all this time, just the mention of Wei Wuxian made her eyes grow sad.

"The Unclean Realm then?" Jin Xuanyu asked, "You know Da-ge isn't nearly as scary as he pretends to be, right? And Huaisang-ge's the one who really runs the place and I'm sure he knows more demonic cultivation than-"

“You aren’t going anywhere,” Jin Zixuan interrupted, “Just...know your limits. If you start hearing voices, or think you’re going to lose control, stop.”

“We will deal with anyone who complains,” A-Li reached out to pat his head.

Jin Xuanyu beamed.

It was a different world.

It was a pity the person they changed it for was long dead.

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In the end, there wasn’t a sign from the heavens that the time was right.

Wei Wuxian just knew.

He laughed, because the alternative was crying, “I see now why so few of your students have left.”

Baoshan Sanren pulled him in for a hug, “They all had a life beyond here waiting for them.”

A life he would never regret. Just as he wouldn’t regret his years on the mountain. Still...

“Were they all afraid?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Was it better or worse that he knew what the world was like beyond Baoshan Sanren’s mountain? He had people he loved waiting for him. He also had people who hated him. He remembered Xiao Xingchen’s fear of being cursed, and felt some uncertainty in his decision. He didn’t want to return to his family only to die on them again.

“Your mother wasn’t,” The Immortal drew back, “Most of my students stay because they can’t see the beauty in chaos. The ones who leave understand the world is a beautiful and terrible place.”

“Sometimes more terrible than beautiful,” Wei Wuxian muttered.

“And sometimes more beautiful than terrible,” She countered easily.

“I wish you didn’t have a rule about not returning,” He whined.

“Silly boy,” She chided, “Everyone has their time in the world. Mine has long since passed.”

It was easier this way. She told him what being immortal felt like. She explained how frustrating it was being at the height of cultivation and realizing others still would not listen. Not even Lan Yi, the one closest to her. They admired her, respected her, but people would always make their own decisions.

So she withdrew. The world would always be chaotic, and as long as she was part of it she would be tempted to bring order.

Wei Wuxian would not tempt her to change. She had her sphere of influence and was happy.

It was time for him to find his and be happy as well.

“Maybe I’ll send A-Yuan your way when he’s older,” He relented.

It was breaking the spirit of her rules, but it didn’t break them.

She smiled, “I would like that.”

“Ah, that’s if Lan Zhan will have me,” He turned towards the path leading down the mountain.

The path to Lan Zhan.

“He’s a Lan,” Baoshan Sanren replied, “He will always have you.”

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Lan Sizhui held out a hand to help Rulan up from the forest floor.

Jingyi bit his lip, “Maybe we should go back to the inn.”

“That’s boring,” Jin Xuanyu waved a hand, “Do you want to be boring?”

“No!” Rulan declared.

Lan Sizhui sighed and resigned himself to more wandering in the forest.

This wasn’t the first time Jin Xuanyu got it into his head that they needed to go on an adventure. Nor would it be the last time. He touched the pocket where he kept the emergency flares. All it would take was a little spiritual energy and all their guardians would come to their location.

Rulan continued holding his hand, but that was none of his uncle/cousin’s business.

“My father says he’s insane,” Ouyang Zizhen whispered behind him.

“Your father insulting him is the reason you’re here,” Jingyi replied, his fear quickly forgotten when faced with an insult to someone he respected.

It wasn’t really respect. Hanguang-Jun said that no one should be condemned just because of the style of cultivation they used. Jingyi idolized his father, so that meant defending Jin Xuanyu, who was often insulted because he preferred demonic cultivation over using his sword.

Lianfeng-Zun once told them to keep their enemies close. Lan Sizhui wasn’t sure he meant befriending Sect Leader Ouyang’s son.

He hoped Jin Xuanyu dragging Ouyang Zizhen from his room at the inn for this was an attempt at making friends. Otherwise they’d kidnapped him to scare him.

Not that there was any danger in these woods.

There had been a recent streak of demonic entities being defeated by a powerful cultivator. Sometimes, he used demonic cultivation. It had begun to irritate the local minor Sect, who felt their glory was being usurped. This then brought the other minor Sect Leaders in, and plans were made to pin down the new demonic cultivator and question him about his intentions.

His father went to make sure those questions stayed friendly. He was Hanguang-Jun, protector of the innocent. Especially the innocent demonic cultivators.

Lan Sizhui was getting to an age where he was allowed to travel to more than just his relative's homes, so he went with his father. As did Rulan with his. Jingyi came with him for company. He assumed Jin Xuanyu tagged along looking for a mentor.

"Don't you think demonic cultivation is dangerous?" Ouyang Zizhen asked.

"Isn't all cultivation dangerous?" Lan Sizhui replied.

Only Jin Xuanyu was old enough to have gone on a real night hunt, but Lan Sizhui had seen his father's scars. He'd seen his uncles'. Maybe Sect Leader Ouyang didn't have any scars. Or maybe his scars didn't come from noble acts of protecting the weak.

"Not the way Ouyang-zongzhu does it," Jingyi commented.

One of these days his friend would learn to keep his thoughts to himself.

Rulan tugged on his hand, "Do you hear that, Sizhui?"

Lan Sizhui shushed the other two and closed his eyes. The wind rustled the leaves above them, but it was also carrying a faint melody.

"A flute," Jin Xuanyu tilted his head, "Another Wei Wuxian wannabe?"

"As if you aren't one," Jingyi grumbled.

Nonetheless, they started towards the sound of the flute.

"It sounds familiar," Lan Sizhui noted.

Rulan squeezed his hand. It wasn't like he made his connection to Wei Wuxian a secret, but Lan Sizhui didn't talk about him with anyone that wasn't immediate family. He was the piece of his life that was constantly missing. All he had left were a handful of memories he was named to hold onto.

He hoped he remembered them correctly. His father would tell him stories, so would his aunts and uncles. Sometimes, he worried that he wasn't remembering actual memories, just creating them based on the stories.

They found a man playing by a creek. He did look like all the other Wei Wuxian imitators, with his black and red clothes. Even his hair was done up with a red ribbon. But this one, if he tried, probably could pass as the former fourth ranked of handsome young masters.

Jin Xuanyu let out a low whistle of appreciation.

Jingyi elbowed him.

The man lowered his flute, immediately finding them, “Kids?” His voice lifted with the question, “Are you lost?” He drew closer.

Rulan tried to step back, but Lan Sizhui stood his ground.

There was something familiar about this man. At least, Lan Sizhui just knew he wouldn’t hurt them.

“I didn’t know the Lan Sect let their disciples out this young,” The man stopped, smiling down at them, “We’re quite a long way from Gusu.” He crossed his arms.

One of his hands was still holding his flute.

Lan Sizhui recognized that flute.

Of the few memories he had of Xian-gege, Chenqing was the clearest.

He let go of his younger cousin’s hand and stumbled closer to his other father, “Xian-gege. Is that...are you...we all thought...”

Wei Wuxian knelt down and met him in a strong embrace, “A-Yuan. You’ve grown.”

Lan Sizhui sobbed. He couldn’t believe this was happening, but as he settled into the hug, everything he could remember, everything he felt, was telling him this was real.

He was reluctant to pull back, but there was one thing that would make this moment perfect.

He gave himself just enough room to fire a flare into the air.

Then he was back in Xian-gege’s arms.

All his life, he knew there was a piece of him missing.

This was it.

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Lan Wangji tired of hearing the same arguments. One day, hopefully soon, there wouldn’t be any more arguments where he just stood there as weaker men tried to convince him of a threat that didn’t exist. He placed his hand on the hilt of his sword, watching them stutter, then fall silent.

Nie Huaisang laughed, “I think we should take a break. We’ve been indoors all day. It’s no wonder things are getting heated.”

Jiang Wanyin placed a hand on his shoulder, then moved outside.

“Come on,” Jin Zixuan prodded.

Lan Wangji glared at the other cultivators in the room, then stormed out.

“Should we get lunch?” Nie Huaisang asked, “We should discuss a better strategy than bullying them into compliance.”

“I won’t tolerate rash action that will lead to injustice,” Lan Wangji said.

“We know that,” Jiang Wanyin rolled his eyes, “But Nie-xiong’s right. Not everything needs to be a fight.”

He sent the Jiang Sect Leader a look. Unless he was mistaken, he saw Zidian flashing long before he moved to touch Bichen. He’d just hidden that arm behind his back so his anger wasn’t as obvious.

They’d each grown from when they were students attending the same lectures, but some things stayed the same.

“Maybe you two should fight each other,” Jin Zixuan suggested, “Let off some steam.”

“Or maybe we have other concerns,” Nie Huaisang pointed his fan.

The Lan Sect symbol burned in the sky above the forest.

“I knew I shouldn’t have brought A-Yu,” The Jin Sect Leader started running.

Lan Wangji took to his sword, leaving Nie Huaisang and Jiang Wanyin to bicker about whether Nie Huaisang would ride on the sword with the Jiang Sect Leader or be left behind to explain their absence.

Sizhui had the emergency flares. Jingyi still hadn’t learned what constituted an emergency. They would be together.

The only reason Sizhui would be in the forest was Jin Xuanyu. They had met on one of Lianfeng-Zun’s visits to the Cloud Recesses. They were well suited for each other, as Sizhui was more thoughtful than many of his peers and Jin Xuanyu was more childish.

As much as he just barely tolerated Lianfeng-Zun’s presence for his brother’s sake, he didn’t dissuade a friendship between their children.

If Jin Xuanyu and Sizhui went somewhere, Rulan would refuse to be left behind.

They were clever children. Sizhui was going to turn ten soon. As smart as he was, ten wasn’t old enough to face down an adult. Jin Xuanyu was thirteen, and trained by Lianfeng-Zun to



do whatever was necessary. The teenager could fend for himself. Especially if it was demonic cultivation against demonic cultivation.

As they drew closer to where the flare disappeared, Lan Wangji stretched his senses.

He didn't hear the sounds of a fight. He didn't feel any spikes of resentful energy.

All the children appeared unharmed when they landed. Rulan immediately ran to his father.

Jingyi ran to him, "Hanguang-Jun! Is this weirdo really Wei Wuxian?"

Lan Wangji froze.

"Who are you calling a weirdo?" Wei Ying asked.

Wei Ying.

Lan Wangji had refused to accept that he was dead. He had hoped, and waited, for the day when his love returned to him. He watched as Wei Ying stood, not even struggling to lift their A-Yuan. His smile hadn't changed, but there was a renewed confidence in his eyes that he hadn't seen since before the war.

"Wei Wuxian!" Jin Zixuan shouted, almost dropping his son.

Wei Ying didn't look at his brother-in-law. His eyes stayed locked on Lan Wangji.

"Wei Ying," He managed to say. He couldn't get himself to move.

"Lan Zhan," His love didn't have the same struggle. He moved towards him with ease, "I'm sorry you had to wait this long-"

As soon as he was within reach, Lan Wangji joined their embrace.

"I hope you didn't mourn for me," Wei Ying couldn't hold him back, but this was good.

This was perfect.

"Mn," Lan Wangji murmured, "I knew we would meet again."

"Always," Wei Ying twisted so A-Yuan was no longer between them.

Lan Wangji molded himself to his back. They'd been separated for far too long. He wasn't eager to let him out of his grasp anytime soon.

"Did you find Baoshan Sanren?" A-Yuan wondered.

"It would be better to say she found me," Wei Ying launched into the story of how he survived, and how he had spent the years of their separation. Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang prevented Jiang Wanyin from attacking when they finally joined them. In a distant sense, he understood he should be angry as well.

Lan Wangji just listened to the sound of Wei Ying's voice.

They'd both been waiting. Lan Wangji for Wei Ying. Wei Ying for a world that wouldn't try to destroy him.

The wait was over.

The world wasn't perfect. The world would never be perfect.

But there was a place for them in it.

"What did I miss?" Wei Ying asked.

Nie Huaisang and Jiang Wanyin talked over each other. Jin Zixuan attempted to interject with what he thought was important, as did Rulan.

Their family had gotten larger. That was most of what he missed.

"Are you two going to get married?" Jin Xuanyu demanded.

Wei Ying hummed and leaned back into him, "What do you think, Lan Zhan? How soon can we get married?"

"Tonight," Lan Wangji replied.

"Hold on a second!" Jiang Wanyin raised his voice, "What about A-Jie and Lan Xichen?"

"Don't need them," Lan Wangji lowered his voice, "Just us."

Wei Ying laughed, "Hanguang-Jun, are you suggesting we elope?"

"Yes."

They could do whatever they wanted, as long as they did it together.

They had time.

## Chapter End Notes

I could continue this story forever, but this is where I'm ending it. If you don't feel it's over, by all means write something that goes with this! I've always been a fan of fics inspired by fics.

Does WWX have a new golden core? I leave that up to your interpretation as I've had comments both ways and I don't particularly feel strongly either way.

I'm sorry I separated them so long, but I hope I made my reasons clear.

A quick note on translations. I only have an AO3 and fanfiction.net account. Wattpad and other sites ask me to sign up if I visit them a lot. I get tired of having to specifically delete those sites from my history just so I can check on the translated stories. So if something goes wrong, just let me know because I can't really check for myself.

Thank you so much for your support! I look forward to writing the other two fics in this series!

Works inspired by this one

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!